

Fibromyalgia (FM) Fact Sheet

What is Fibromyalgia?

Fibromyalgia (pronounced Fy-bro-my-AL-ja) is a common and complex chronic pain disorder that causes widespread pain and tenderness to touch that may occur body wide or migrate over the body. It is recognized by the American Medical Association, the National Institutes of Health and the American College of Rheumatology. FM experts estimate that about 10 million Americans and approximately 2-4% of the population worldwide suffer with FM. While it is most common in women, the illness strikes men, women and children of all ages and ethnic backgrounds. For those with severe symptoms, FM can be extremely debilitating and interfere with even routine daily activities. (More information is available at <http://www.fmcpaware.org>.)

How is Fibromyalgia diagnosed?

In 2010, ACR fibromyalgia diagnostic criteria recommended that focus on the number of tender points should be replaced by physician physical and interview examinations, including a widespread pain index (WPI) of the number of painful body regions. A diagnosis also includes scoring of cognitive symptoms, sleep disturbances, fatigue, and the number of somatic (physical) symptoms. The category scoring is summed to create a symptom severity (SS) scale. The combination of the SS scale score and the WPI indicate a diagnosis of fibromyalgia where WP is greater than or equal to 7 and SS is greater than or equal to 5. Developed in the late 1980s and later revised, the Fibromyalgia Impact Questionnaire, has been recognized for both research and clinical diagnosis criteria. (For FIQR, see <http://www.myalgia.com/FIQR/FIQR%20updated%2006%202010.pdf>.) Since people with FM tend to look healthy and conventional tests are typically normal, a physician knowledgeable about the illness is necessary to make a diagnosis. Physicians should rule out other causes of the symptoms before making a diagnosis of fibromyalgia.

What are the Symptoms of Fibromyalgia?

Although chronic, widespread body pain is the primary symptom of fibromyalgia, a variety of other symptoms are common. Symptoms frequently include moderate to severe fatigue; problems with cognitive functioning and memory; headaches and migraines; and neurological symptoms such as dizziness, vision problems, numbness, noise sensitivity, or impaired coordination. Research has documented particular abnormalities that frequently occur in the deep stages of sleep, preventing restful, restorative sleep. Co-existing conditions may include: TMJD, IBS, IC, restless legs syndrome (skin sensitivities and rashes, dry eyes and mouth, anxiety, depression, tinnitus, dizziness, vision problems, and Raynaud's Syndrome. (For a more complete list, please see <http://www.fmcpaware.org/overlapping-conditions.html>.)

What are the Causes of Fibromyalgia?

While the underlying cause or causes of FM still remain unknown, most researchers agree that FM is a disorder of central processing with neuroendocrine and neurotransmitter dysregulation, with pain amplification due to abnormal sensory processing in the central nervous system. An increasing number of scientific studies show multiple physiological abnormalities in FM, including: increased levels of substance P in the spinal cord, low levels of blood flow to the thalamus region of the brain, HPA axis hypofunction, low levels of serotonin and tryptophan, and abnormalities in cytokine function. Recent studies show genetic factors which may predispose individuals to a susceptibility to FM. For some, the onset of FM is slow; however, in a large percentage of patients the onset is triggered by an illness or injury that causes trauma to the body. These events may act to incite an undetected physiological problem already present.

What are the Treatments for Fibromyalgia?

Since there is no known cure for FM, a multidisciplinary, integrative approach is used combining treatments, including patient education, graded exercise, cognitive behavioral therapy and pharmacologic therapies. A variety of prescription medications are often used to reduce pain levels and improve sleep. Massage, myofascial release, acupuncture, chiropractic, herbal supplements and yoga can be effective tools in managing FM symptoms. One of the most important factors in successfully managing FM is recognizing the need for lifestyle changes. Increasing rest, pacing activities carefully, reducing stress, practicing relaxation and improving nutrition can help minimize symptoms and improve quality of life.

What is the Prognosis for Fibromyalgia?

The course of the illness varies greatly. While symptoms tend to wax and wane, most FM patients tend to improve over time with interventions. Fibromyalgia sufferers should be reassured that although the condition is painful, it does not damage tissues; appropriate treatment and lifestyle changes can help patients manage the illness.