

Fibromyalgia

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This handout provides some information on fibromyalgia and its treatment.

What is fibromyalgia?

Fibromyalgia is a syndrome characterised by longstanding, widespread body pain and tenderness. It affects thousands of people in Australia and is most common in young to middle-aged women. It can occur on its own, in combination with other long term illnesses or after life stress events such as a significant injury, relationship breakdown or death of a loved one.

What are the causes?

Fibromyalgia is caused by sensitisation of the body's pain nervous system, so that many everyday, usually nonpainful sensations are experienced as pain – almost as though the 'volume control dial' has been turned up on the pain system.

What are the symptoms?

People with fibromyalgia feel significant pain on performing ordinary activities, often to the extent that they avoid usual actions and tasks. It also means that they are particularly tender to touch, as most pressure is now felt as pain. Many people who suffer from fibromyalgia also describe problems with poor sleep, chronic fatigue, memory and thinking difficulties, and have high levels of distress.

Are there associated conditions?

Other conditions are often associated with fibromyalgia. These include depression, chronic headaches, irritable bowel syndrome, lower jaw joint dysfunction, vulvar pain and multiple chemical sensitivities.

What is the prognosis?

Fibromyalgia is potentially reversible and generally improves with treatment. However, progress can be slow and it sometimes takes months to see definite improvement. It is important that a treatment program is started as soon as possible, and that it is maintained to achieve lasting benefit.

What is the treatment?

Often just having the condition recognised and explained helps improve the distress experienced by people with fibromyalgia. It is important to understand that active participation in managing fibromyalgia gives people with this condition better symptom relief.

Treatment of fibromyalgia needs to involve several different aspects in order to be



Taking part in regular exercise and relaxation activities and learning to cope with stress are part of the treatment of fibromyalgia.



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most effective. Although your local doctor is the best person to help co-ordinate these into a single management formula, the key person who must remain motivated and actively involved for the strategy to be successful is you.

Physical activity

Physical activity in the form of stretching, strengthening and aerobic exercise (i.e. exercising to increase heart rate and fitness) is incredibly important. This provides significant long term benefit if it is maintained as a regular regimen. The aerobic exercise should begin very slowly and for short sessions, then the intensity and duration should be slowly increased over months to reach a target of 20 minutes of aerobic activity three times per week, with appropriate warm up and cool down periods. Many people prefer to exercise in a warm swimming pool, as this seems to be gentler on the body.

Relaxation and stress relief activities

Relaxation and stress relief activities are also essential. They may be simple routines that can be done at home, or more formal, organised programs. Some people need a type of therapy called cognitive behavioural therapy, which can also help them with goal setting and coping strategies.

Medications

Medications can certainly be helpful in treating some aspects of fibromyalgia, but they are always more effective when combined with physical exercise and relaxation and stress relieving activities. There are many different medications used to treat fibromyalgia, and they often produce different levels of symptom control in different people. Types of medications used include pain medications, antidepressants and antiepileptic medications, often in combination.

Further information

Further information can be obtained from Arthritis Australia (freecall 1800 011 041, www.arthritisaustralia.com.au), which has offices in each State and Territory.

Other helpful websites include:

- A path out of pain: www.pathoutofpain.com.au (information on coping with chronic pain and fibromyalgia)
- American College of Rheumatology: www.rheumatology.org/public/factsheets/fibromya_new.asp?aud=pat (a factsheet on fibromyalgia). **MT**



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