

## FIBROMYALGIA

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So you have been told by your doctor that you have fibromyalgia. Will you always hurt? Will life be any fun anymore? Are you doomed?

There are many people with chronic pain in their neck, shoulders, or lower back. They may be diagnosed as having fibromyalgia when they ask their doctor during an office visit "I've had pain and fatigue for quite a while, could I have fibromyalgia?" Their doctor may say that fibromyalgia does not exist, or may agree and hand them a pamphlet about fibromyalgia that describes their symptoms very closely. Antidepressant medication is commonly prescribed and exercise may be encouraged. Now there is an alternative approach to treating this disorder that also includes education, bodywork, and perhaps lifestyle changes.

The condition recognized as fibromyalgia, has a 200-year-old medical history. It was first called muscular rheumatism, then fibrocitis. In 1990, the American College of Rheumatology defined criteria for classifying people as having, or not having fibromyalgia. These criteria include a carefully defined combination of:

- 3 month history of wide spread pain
- pain on both sides of the body
- pain above and below the waist
- pain along the spine or chest
- pain with pushing on 11 of 18 specifically defined tender points

Even with this definition, not all doctors agree as to what fibromyalgia is, or even how it should be treated. Many doctors think that fibromyalgia is a primary disease of muscle tissue. Newer theories discuss involvement of the nervous system and immune system. In addition, there is evidence for a hereditary component.

There are several symptoms that are commonly associated with fibromyalgia. These include bizarre pain, chronic fatigue, sleep disorders, depression, irritable bowel syndrome, chronic headaches, temporomandibular joint dysfunction, morning stiffness, memory impairment, and irritable bladder. Symptoms are typically worsened with changes in the weather, physical activity, and stress.

People with chronic myofascial pain syndromes have many symptoms in common with people who have fibromyalgia. Indeed, it can be very difficult to differentiate these two conditions. There is no medical test for diagnosing fibromyalgia. Sometimes people with myofascial pain syndromes are diagnosed as having fibromyalgia. People with fibromyalgia all have myofascial pain. Indeed, much of the pain of fibromyalgia is myofascial in origin. Fortunately there is a treatment protocol that is usually helpful for both of these conditions.

There are many important considerations in treating patients with fibromyalgia. Nutrition plays an important part in treatment. We get out of our bodies only the quality of what we put into them. “Whole foods” such as grain bread and brown rice are better for our bodies than processed food such as white flour and white rice. Refined sugar is perhaps the worst of the processed foods for us to eat. Many people do better if they do not eat wheat. Another consideration is stress management. There are central nervous system mechanisms that make muscles generate more pain when we are under more stress. Since we do not live in a stress free environment, we can often be helped by techniques that change how we respond to stress. A good night’s sleep is also very important in healing our bodies. Sleep deprivation in normal people causes fatigue and diffuse pain patterns to occur. Medication that is not addictive may be prescribed to help restore normal sleep patterns. This often has a beneficial effect on the pain level and fatigue of fibromyalgia. In addition, there are dietary supplements that can help to reduce fatigue. A good multiple vitamin, vitamin C, magnesium, vitamin B-12, and folic acid, are examples of dietary supplements that can be helpful. Co-enzyme Q may be helpful in some people. Less conservative treatment that centers on chronic yeast (candida) has also been helpful in many patients. Active allergic states can also cause the pain of fibromyalgia to increase and treatment for allergic conditions can also be helpful.

Aerobic exercise and general muscular conditioning are very important parts of treatment. Fibromyalgia patients need to learn how to use their bodies in such a way that activity can be fun, without paying for this fun with days of pain. In addition, pain can often be reduced with bodywork. Most fibromyalgia patients will respond to the same kinds of body work that help people with myofascial pain. Hands on myofascial release techniques and massage therapy are usually beneficial. Healing Touch, energy healing, Feldenkrais therapy and Chiropractic can be very helpful. AquaMed Hydrotherapy has also been very helpful for many patients. Specific treatment of myofascial trigger points is also usually helpful. This includes accupressure and myofascial trigger point injections using local anesthetic agents.

There is also hope for a brighter future. Research is helping doctors to understand more about body mechanisms involved in causing the symptoms of fibromyalgia. New medications are being developed as a result of this research that will continue to improve the quality of life for the many people who suffer from this condition.