

There is most often some triggering factor that sets off fibromyalgia. It may be spine problems, arthritis, injury, or other type of physical stress. Emotional stress also may trigger this illness. The result is a change in the way the body "talks" with the spinal cord and brain. Levels of brain chemicals and proteins may change. More recently, Fibromyalgia has been described as Central Pain Amplification disorder, meaning the volume of pain sensation in the brain is turned up too high.

Although Fibromyalgia can affect quality of life, it is still considered medically benign. It does not cause any heart attacks, stroke, cancer, physical deformities, or loss of life.

How is fibromyalgia diagnosed?

A doctor will suspect fibromyalgia based on your symptoms. Doctors may require that you have tenderness to pressure or tender points at a specific number of certain spots before saying you have fibromyalgia, but they are not required to make the diagnosis (see the Box). A physical exam can be helpful to detect tenderness and to exclude other causes of muscle pain. There are no diagnostic tests (such as X-rays or blood tests) for this problem. Yet, you may need tests to rule out another health problem that can be confused with fibromyalgia.

Because widespread body pain is the main feature of fibromyalgia, health care providers will ask you to describe your pain. This may help tell the difference between fibromyalgia and other diseases with similar symptoms. Other conditions such as hypothyroidism (underactive thyroid gland) and polymyalgia rheumatica sometimes mimic fibromyalgia. Blood tests can tell if you have either of these problems. Sometimes, fibromyalgia is confused with rheumatoid arthritis or lupus. But, again, there is a difference in the symptoms, physical findings and blood tests that will help your health care provider detect these health problems. Unlike fibromyalgia, these rheumatic diseases cause inflammation in the joints and tissues.

Criteria Needed for a Fibromyalgia Diagnosis

1. Pain and symptoms over the past week, based on the total of number of painful areas out of 19 parts of the body plus level of severity of these symptoms:

- a. Fatigue
- b. Waking unrefreshed
- c. Cognitive (memory or thought) problems

Plus number of other general physical symptoms

2. Symptoms lasting at least three months at a similar level

3. No other health problem that would explain the pain and other symptoms

How is fibromyalgia treated?

There is no cure for fibromyalgia. However, symptoms can be treated with both non-drug and medication based treatments. Many times the best outcomes are achieved by using multiple types of treatments.

Non-Drug Therapies: People with fibromyalgia should use non-drug treatments as well as any medicines their doctors suggest. Research shows that the most effective treatment for fibromyalgia is physical exercise. Physical exercise should be used in addition to any drug treatment. Patients benefit most from regular aerobic exercises. Other body-based therapies, including Tai Chi and yoga, can ease fibromyalgia symptoms. Although you may be in pain, low impact physical exercise will not be harmful.

Cognitive behavioral therapy is a type of therapy focused on understanding how thoughts and behaviors affect pain and other symptoms. CBT and related treatments, such as mindfulness, can help patients learn symptom reduction skills that lessen pain. Mindfulness is a non-spiritual meditation practice that cultivates present moment awareness. Mindfulness based stress reduction has been shown to significantly improve symptoms of fibromyalgia.

Other complementary and alternative therapies (sometimes called CAM or integrative medicine), such as acupuncture, chiropractic and massage therapy, can be useful to manage fibromyalgia symptoms. Many of these treatments, though, have not been well tested in patients with fibromyalgia.

It is important to address risk factors and triggers for fibromyalgia including sleep disorders, such as sleep apnea, and mood problems such as stress, anxiety, panic disorder, and depression. This may require involvement of other specialists such as a Sleep Medicine doctor, Psychiatrist, and therapist.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has approved three drugs for the treatment of fibromyalgia. They include two