

Fibromyalgia

This sheet has been written for people affected by fibromyalgia. It provides general information to help you understand how fibromyalgia affects you and what you can do to manage it. It also tells you where to find further information and advice.

What is fibromyalgia?

Fibromyalgia is a name given to a group of symptoms marked by generalised pain and muscle stiffness. These symptoms can be felt in all different areas of the body. Extreme fatigue (tiredness) and sleep problems are also common in fibromyalgia. Fibromyalgia does not cause inflammation or damage to the painful areas, but seems to be due to an over active pain system. Fibromyalgia is different to polymyalgia rheumatica, a type of arthritis in which symptoms are felt more in the muscles.

What are the symptoms?

The most common symptoms of fibromyalgia are:

- pain – usually aching, stiffness and tiredness of muscles. Pain may be worst after rest (eg. first thing in the morning) or after activity
- extreme fatigue (tiredness), making it difficult to do your normal daily activities
- poor sleep
- problems with concentration and memory
- irritable bowel (diarrhoea, stomach pain).

What causes it?

It is not known what causes fibromyalgia. It may be more common in people who have:

- inflammatory arthritis (for example, rheumatoid arthritis)
- an illness, such as a virus (or following an illness or infection)
- pain from an injury or trauma
- experienced emotional stress and depression.

For many people fibromyalgia starts without any obvious cause. Research suggests that the body may become extra sensitive in the way it signals and processes pain in people with fibromyalgia.

How is it diagnosed?

Fibromyalgia can be very difficult to diagnose. It does not cause any inflammation or damage. Even the painful muscles have been shown to look and function normally. There are no blood tests, x-rays or scans that can test for fibromyalgia. Your doctor or rheumatologist (arthritis specialist) will look for a number of signs that are typical of fibromyalgia. These include widespread pain for more than three months and widespread tenderness of the body.

What will happen to me?

The good news is that fibromyalgia does not cause any lasting damage to the muscles or joints. It is important to remember that, with help and better understanding, the symptoms can be effectively managed. The symptoms of fibromyalgia may range from very mild to severe. They may last for many years or they may come and go at different times. With the right advice most people find they learn to manage the pain and tiredness over time. Health professional input may be required at times if the pain is more severe and affecting your normal activities.

Can fibromyalgia be cured?

Currently there is no cure for fibromyalgia. While there are ways you can control your symptoms, you should be wary of any products or treatments that claim to cure fibromyalgia.

What can I do?

Learn about fibromyalgia and play an active role in your treatment. Not all information you read or hear about is trustworthy so always talk to your doctor or healthcare team about treatments you are thinking about trying. Reliable sources of further information are also listed in the section below. Self management courses aim to help you develop skills to be actively involved in your healthcare. Contact your local Arthritis Office for details of these courses.

Find ways to manage pain. It can be useful to change the way you think about, and react to, pain. A psychologist can teach you skills to help you manage your pain. Acupuncture, particularly with electrical stimulation, may also help reduce pain and improve overall wellbeing, sleep and fatigue. See the *Dealing with pain* information sheet.

Stay active. Exercise has been proven by research to help with pain and other symptoms. Always start gently and slowly, and build up as you become fitter and stronger. See the *Exercise and fibromyalgia* sheet for more information.

Balance activity and rest. Learn to listen to your body and be guided by it. Try to space out your week's activities to give yourself time to rest. If you are having a bad day, be ready to change your plans and not force yourself to

work through pain. See an occupational therapist to learn ways to cope with fatigue and make daily tasks easier. See the *Working with your healthcare team* sheet for more information about seeing an occupational therapist and the *Saving energy* information sheet.

Keep to a healthy weight. There is no proof that a special diet can help fibromyalgia. Losing any extra weight and having a healthy diet will help you feel in control of your body. See the *Healthy eating* information sheet.

Talk to your doctor about medicines. Typical arthritis medicines, such as pain relievers and anti-inflammatory drugs, are not usually helpful in fibromyalgia. However some people with fibromyalgia may find that their pain or other symptoms can be controlled with medicines that are sometimes used to treat epilepsy or depression. Always talk to your doctor or pharmacist before you start taking any medicines as even natural and over-the-counter medicines can have side effects.

Acknowledge your feelings and seek support. As there is no cure for fibromyalgia and it can affect many parts of your life, it is natural to feel scared, frustrated, sad and sometimes angry. Be aware of these feelings and get help if they start affecting your daily life. See the *Arthritis and emotions* information sheet.

CONTACT YOUR LOCAL ARTHRITIS OFFICE FOR MORE INFORMATION SHEETS ON ARTHRITIS.

Learn about fibromyalgia and your treatment options.

There are many things you can do to live well with fibromyalgia.

For more information:

To find a physiotherapist, ask your doctor, contact the Australian Physiotherapy Association on 1300 306 622 or use the 'find a physio' feature at www.physiotherapy.asn.au

To find an occupational therapist, ask your doctor, contact Occupational Therapy Australia on 1300 682 878 or use the 'find an OT' feature at www.otaus.com.au

To find a psychologist, ask your doctor or contact the

Australian Psychological Society on 1800 333 497 or www.psychology.org.au

Websites: Arthritis Research UK www.arthritisresearchuk.org
American College of Rheumatology www.rheumatology.org
Arthritis Foundation (US) www.arthritis.org
Fibromyalgia Network (US) www.fmnetnews.com

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Your local Arthritis Office has information, education and support for people with arthritis
Helpline 1800 011 041 www.arthritisaustralia.com.au

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