

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 overactive pain system. Fibromyalgia is different to polymyalgia rheumatica, a type of arthritis that causes inflammation 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 (for example, 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
- emotional stress and depression.

For many people fibromyalgia starts without any obvious cause. Early research suggests that the body may be 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. As such 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 'tender points', which are areas on the body that are abnormally sore to touch.

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 the symptoms are always reversible and are best managed by the person with the problem. 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. However fibromyalgia is usually not disabling. 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. 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. You may find it useful to get advice from a physiotherapist, especially when you are first starting to exercise. See the *Working with your healthcare team* sheet for more information about seeing a physiotherapist and the *Exercise and fibromyalgia* information sheet.

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. Some medicines may help with sleep and reduce stress. Typical arthritis medicines, such as anti-inflammatory drugs, are not usually helpful in fibromyalgia. 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:

Books *Good living with fibromyalgia 2006*, Arthritis Foundation of America, Atlanta, GA.

Staud, Roland & Adamec, Christine 2002, *Fibromyalgia for dummies*, Wiley Publishing Inc, New York NY.

Marek, Claudia Craig 2003, *The first year: Fibromyalgia*, Marlowe & Company, New York NY.

Websites The Arthritis Research Campaign www.arc.org.uk

American College of Rheumatology www.rheumatology.org

Arthritis Foundation (US) www.arthritis.org

Fibromyalgia Network (US) www.fmnetnews.com

The Australian Physiotherapy Association can help you 'find a physio' at www.physiotherapy.asn.au

The Australian Association of Occupational Therapists can help you 'find an OT' at www.ausot.com.au

© Copyright Arthritis Australia 2008. Reviewed December 2008. **Source:** A full list of the references used to compile this sheet is available from your local Arthritis Office. The Australian General Practice Network, Australian Physiotherapy Association, Australian Practice Nurses Association, Pharmaceutical Society of Australia and Royal Australian College of General Practitioners contributed to the development of this information sheet. The Australian Government has provided funding to support this project.

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