



Fibromyalgia Syndrome

Fibromyalgia or Fibromyalgia Syndrome (FMS) means "**pain in fibrous tissue**". It is characterized by abnormal central sensory processing of pain signals and is felt to be a soft tissue "rheumatism", although **no inflammation is present** in FMS.

Its predominant symptom is widespread muscle discomfort / aches, and joint aches. Other symptoms, such as fatigue, stiffness, numbness or tingling, chest pain, low-grade fever, swollen lymph nodes, disturbed sleep or insomnia, frequent abdominal pain, irritable bowel syndrome, and depression, may be involved.

Chronic Fatigue, Irritable Bowel, Regional Myofascial Pain, Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy, and Premenstrual Syndrome have all been related with FMS.

Of the estimated 2 percent of the U.S. population with this disorder, the majority are women between twenty-five and forty-five years old, although it can appear in any age, and in the elderly.

Diagnosis: Certain diagnostic criteria must be met to be diagnosed with FMS:
1) widespread discomfort for at least 3 months. 2) 11 of 18 specific tender or trigger points must be localized on clinical examination. These are mostly located in the pelvic girdle, upper back and neck, and chest wall. Muscle and joint examinations are normal; blood and urine examinations are also normal as are tests for inflammation. More expensive testing - EMG's, CT scans, MRI's, etc. are not needed, and a physician requesting these probably has little experience with FMS.

Etiology: People with FMS have had elevated levels of substance P (a pain factor), and nerve growth factor in the spinal fluid. A relative serotonin deficiency has also been noted. Deep sleep (REM) is frequently abnormal, normal cortisol response to stress is frequently affected, and some chronic pain receptors are over activated. Further, FMS has been positively related with psychological distress or trauma, and subjects of sexual, emotional or physical abuse are at higher risk for FMS. Infections in any area of the body may predate appearance of FMS, and FMS may occur when medications or substances of abuse are withdrawn.

Interestingly, yet unfortunately, many people with FMS have been told they have siliconosis from breast implants, multiple chemical sensitivity, yeast hypersensitivity, allergy to metal tooth fillings, etc., all because their physician was unfamiliar with FMS!! No scientific proof of any connection with these has been proven!

Treatment:

- **Lifestyle changes** that may be helpful:
 - 1) Absolutely NO alcohol, smoking, or caffeine - these all interfere with body healing and sleep patterns.
 - 2) Regular low-intensity exercise for conditioning has been proven to improve fibromyalgia symptoms by increasing natural pain substances in the brain, and preventing muscle and bone loss from inactivity!
 - 3) Since stress can worsen symptoms, stress-reduction techniques such as meditation, self relaxation / hypnosis, have also proved to be helpful.
 - Acupuncture may also improve symptoms.
 - Counseling for those who have been involved with abuse may also be markedly helpful!
- **Nutritional supplements** are helpful:
 - **Soy protein** has a wonderful anti-inflammatory effect and has had marked benefit in many individuals by entering the pain blocking cycle in the same pathway as do the prescription arthritis medications without the side effects these produce.
 - Similarly, the use of **essential fatty acids** and **fish oils** have been helpful due to their anti-inflammatory properties.
 - One study found low red blood-cell **magnesium** in FMS patients.
 - Other studies have found FMS patients to have low **vitamin B** levels and reduced activity of some **thiamine**-dependent enzymes.
 - One study describes the use of **vitamin E** supplements in the range of 100-400 IU per day with positive and sometimes dramatic benefit. Individuals with FMS often have low serotonin levels in their blood.
 - Supplementation with **St. John's Wort** will help increase serotonin levels.
 - Oral **SAM** was tested in one controlled study and had some significant beneficial actions, such as reduced pain, fatigue, and stiffness, and improved mood.
- **Herbs may be helpful:** While no herbal supplements have been studied specifically for fibromyalgia, herbs used to relieve symptoms of chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) should also be useful for fibromyalgia.
 - These include the initial use of licorice root three times per day.
 - Ongoing use of an adaptogenic herb, such as ginseng.
 - There is also preliminary evidence that cayenne (hot peppers) are beneficial in the treatment of fibromyalgia.
- **Traditional treatment:**
 - Prescription anti-depressants, often in combination in low doses are markedly effective.
 - Injection of trigger points.

- Physical therapy and stretching are quite beneficial.
- Use of anti-inflammatory arthritis medications are tremendously helpful with discomfort.

Unfortunately, many of these prescription medications can have side effects and need to be used judiciously when the lifestyle changes and nutritional supplements have failed to give sufficient improvement.

Prognosis: In general over 75 % of FMS patients resolve within a 2 -3 year time period with good nutrition, patient involvement in their treatment with the suggested modalities, and teamwork with a knowledgeable physician! 90 % of FMS patients who want to work do so regularly, and over 2/3 do so full time. Working with your employer to modify jobs and to be understanding with the FMS diagnosis markedly improves the ability to work and feel productive - another boost toward recovery!

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