

Patient information from BMJ

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Fibromyalgia: what is it?

Everyone gets aches and pains from time to time. But if you have long-term widespread pain across your whole body, along with other symptoms such as fatigue and problems with your memory, you may have a condition called fibromyalgia.

There's no cure for fibromyalgia, but there are treatments that can help. You may need to try different treatments to see what helps you most.

What is fibromyalgia?

It's common to get aches and pains, especially if you're feeling tired and run down or if you've been ill. And many types of pain have a cause that we can pin down.

But for people with fibromyalgia pain becomes a daily experience, even though there's no obvious reason for their pain.

We don't know exactly what causes fibromyalgia. But it's possible that people with fibromyalgia may have a sensitive **central nervous system**, so that they feel more pain than other people.

Our nerves send pain signals from around our body to our brain, which makes sense of them and decides how much importance to give them. It may be that, in fibromyalgia, something makes the brain too sensitive to these pain signals. So you feel more pain from everyday sensations than other people do.

Fibromyalgia can sometimes have a specific cause, such as:

- A serious infection
- Having surgery, or
- An emotionally stressful life event.

But in most people there's no clear cause. We do know, though, that certain things make you more or less likely to get fibromyalgia. For example, fibromyalgia:

- Is much more common in women than in men. About 90 in 100 people who get fibromyalgia are women

Fibromyalgia: what is it?

- Affects about 3 or 4 in every 100 women, but less than 1 in 100 men
- Is most common in women between the ages of 20 and 60, with the most common starting age being 35
- Can affect children, but it's less common than in adults, and
- Tends to run in families.

What are the symptoms?

The most obvious symptom is long-term pain. People with fibromyalgia feel pain:

- All over their body, on both sides, front and back
- Above and below their waist, and
- As joint pain, muscle pain, or both.

Doctors diagnose fibromyalgia by asking about your pain and examining you. Usually, doctors don't diagnose fibromyalgia unless you've had widespread pain for **three months** or more.

There aren't any medical tests for fibromyalgia. But your doctor will probably want to do some tests, including a blood test, to rule out other possible causes of your symptoms.

People with fibromyalgia often have other illnesses as well. Most people with fibromyalgia feel very tired most of the time. This condition is sometimes called **chronic fatigue syndrome**.

It's also quite common to have stomach problems, such as:

- Diarrhoea
- Constipation
- Stomach pain, and
- Bloating.

This is called **irritable bowel syndrome**. Some women also have a sensitive, painful bladder, and need to urinate very often. This condition is called **interstitial cystitis**.

People with fibromyalgia often have other symptoms, such as:

- Finding it hard to get to sleep at night, or finding your sleep unrefreshing
- Finding it hard to concentrate and think properly, and
- Having memory problems.

Some of these symptoms may be caused by tiredness.

With all these difficulties it's not surprising that many people with fibromyalgia become depressed or anxious. People with fibromyalgia are much more likely than other people to have **depression** or **anxiety**.

What to expect in the future?

Most people with fibromyalgia find that their symptoms get better over time. But it is a long-term condition. You may find your symptoms come and go. You'll probably have good days and bad days.

The aim of treatment is to help you manage your symptoms so that you feel less pain and you are able to get on with your life. To read about treatments, see the leaflet *Fibromyalgia: what treatments work?*

Although fibromyalgia can make you feel very miserable it may help to know that it's not a life-threatening disease. And it's not a sign of damage to your joints or muscles. Understanding your pain may help you worry about it less, and this may reduce the amount of pain you feel.

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