

Patient information from BMJ

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Fibromyalgia: what is it?

We all get aches and pains from time to time. But if you have long-term widespread pain across your whole body, 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. But for people with fibromyalgia pain becomes a daily experience, even though there's nothing obviously wrong with their muscles or joints to cause the pain.

We don't know exactly what causes fibromyalgia. People with fibromyalgia may have a sensitive **central nervous system**, so 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.

Many people get fibromyalgia without ever knowing why. But some people say they get it after a painful experience, such as being injured in a car accident, or having a serious illness or major emotional upset (for example, a divorce).

Fibromyalgia is most common in women between the ages of 20 and 60, with the most common starting age being 35.

Only 1 in 10 people with fibromyalgia are men. Rarely, this condition affects children. It seems to run in families, so it may be partly caused by the genes you inherit from your parents.

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, and above and below their waist. You might have joint pain, muscle pain, or both.

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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 blood tests that can confirm fibromyalgia, but your doctor will probably want to do a blood test, if only to rule out other causes of your symptoms. And they might suggest you also have other tests.

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 might 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.

Fibromyalgia is quite rare in children, but it does sometimes happen. Children are more likely than adults to recover completely from fibromyalgia.

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