Fibromyalgia and IBS — How Are They Linked?

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The pain connection and tips for effective treatment

Unfortunately, recent studies have shown that those who suffer from both fibromyalgia and IBS are faced with a noticeably more painful outcome: when IBS symptoms strike, fibromyalgia pain and fatigue increase, and a fibro flare tends to increase the frequency and severity of IBS symptoms. Living with either disorder is difficult enough, but when they team up, the interference with daily responsibilities and emotional balance can be too much to handle. Learn how these painful conditions relate to each other and what treatment options are available to quell the discomfort and restore your control.

The Connection between Fibromyalgia and IBS

Research suggests that up to 60% of patients with IBS also suffer from fibromyalgia, while 70% of fibromyalgia patients could also be diagnosed with IBS. IBS is a common symptom of fibromyalgia in women and experts agree that, although they are distinct conditions, there is certainly a link between the two disorders, and many suspect that the similar nature of the two disorders have something to do with their concurrence:

- Both conditions are functional disorders, which means the problem is with organ function rather than organ structure.
- Both conditions involve abnormal pain processing. IBS patients and fibromyalgia patients are hypersensitive to pain, but it’s impossible to pinpoint a physical cause for the discomfort.
- Both conditions respond well to a certain class of antidepressants, which suggests they might share the same cause.

While symptoms like depression and anxiety are common to both conditions, it’s difficult to tell if these mark a connection or are rather effects of the chronic discomfort, and subsequent isolation that comes with each disease. One thing is for sure: when you suffer from both fibromyalgia and IBS, your symptoms can quickly and drastically reduce your quality of life if you don’t take action.

How to Handle Fibromyalgia and IBS

Fatiguing, painful, unpredictable and embarrassing – your list of complaints can add up quickly without the right sort of targeted therapy to treat your IBS and fibromyalgia. Luckily, there are a few approaches that have been effective for both conditions:

- **Behavioral Therapy**. Simply stated, behavioral therapy is an attempt to modify your current behavior with physical and psychological techniques, and it has been an effective approach for both IBS and fibromyalgia patients. A change in your diet and exercise regime can address acute IBS symptoms and also relieve some of the fatigue and discomfort of fibromyalgia, so begin to keep a food diary and use an elimination diet to pinpoint triggers. Stress and anxiety are other common culprits behind a fibro flare or GI attack, and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) can teach you how to quickly and effectively relieve the

strain, and in turn, the symptoms.

- **Medication**. Lifestyle changes are important, but they aren't always enough. When it comes to medication, the best short-term solution for you will depend on your specific IBS symptoms (that is, if you're more prone to constipation or diarrhea). When it comes to long-term management, tricyclic antidepressants may be your best bet: while they're not a cure-all for every patient, these particular antidepressants have been shown to decrease pain sensations, increase serotonin and norepinephrine (calming neurotransmitters), and combat digestive distress. There are often side effects with medication, and it can take some time to see results with psychological therapy, so try to be patient and optimistic while you search for a suitable remedy. Keep track of new or worsening symptoms, and be sure to stay in contact with your doctor along the way.