# What Are the Symptoms of Fibromyalgia?

by ADRIEL MALDONADO

## The 11 Most Common Fibromyalgia Symptoms

We have been seeing a broadening in recognition of fibromyalgia in the past few years. And this is for a good reason, and fibromyalgia is one of the most common chronic pain conditions.

It has been estimated that 10 million people in the U.S. alone have fibromyalgia, and approximately three to six percent of the world population are living with this mysterious condition.

So, what do we know about this ever-increasing illness? Sadly, not enough. Researchers keep working to understand fibromyalgia better, but on the whole, it remains a perplexing disorder.

### What Causes Fibromyalgia?

The cause of fibromyalgia is not entirely understood. It has been found though, that certain factors can increase the likelihood of developing fibromyalgia.

Even though fibromyalgia is not considered a hereditary disease, there does seem that genetics is one possible factor, as fibromyalgia has been seen among family groups.

- Certain infections may also cause fibromyalgia in some people, such as hepatitis C, Epstein-Barr virus, Lyme disease, or parvovirus.
- Autoimmune disorders, such as Rheumatoid Arthritis, lupus, osteoarthritis, or ankylosing spondylitis, have also been linked to the onslaught of fibromyalgia.
- Injury or physical trauma, such as a car accident, has been the catalyst that triggers fibromyalgia for many individuals.
- Emotional trauma or distress, especially during childhood, has also been found to be the cause of fibromyalgia for many.

### What Are the Symptoms of Fibromyalgia?

Fibromyalgia is a complex disorder that causes a long list of possible symptoms or companion illnesses. Each one of us affiliated with fibromyalgia have our own set of symptoms that may come and go, or wane in level of intensity.

We all experience fibromyalgia in our own unique way, one of the things that make fibromyalgia a challenge to treat and to even understand.

Some of the most common symptoms of fibromyalgia are:

- Pain.

- Fatigue.
- Cognitive fatigue.
- Joint and muscle stiffness.
- Stomach and digestive problems.
- Depression and anxiety.
- Hormonal Imbalances.
- Headaches.
- Muscle spasms.
- Sensitivity to lights and sound.
- Sensitivity to chemicals.

**Pain**

Fibromyalgia causes pain throughout the whole body. Largely, so many parts of your body will hurt at once that it can only be described as an all-over pain.

Imagine being in a room and you are surrounded by people screaming at you. Now try to pinpoint what each individual is saying. This would be difficult, maybe even impossible to do. That is what pain is often like for us. At times like this, it is difficult even to compute what is hurting and the type of pain that it is.

While at times we may have pain in only one or two places, it is rare for a person with fibromyalgia to be completely pain-free.

The type of pain that afflicts us can differ from day to day, even moment to moment. The pain from fibromyalgia has been described in a number of different ways, and the following are the most commonly used:

- Deep pain.
- Aching pain.
- Radiating pain.
- Stabbing pain.
- Hyperesthesia, sensitivity to touch.
- Hyperalgesia, an increase in pain sensation.

*Next page: More fibromyalgia symptoms to be aware of including physical and cognitive fatigue, joint and muscle pain, stomach and digestive problems, and more.*

## Fibromyalgia Symptoms

**Fatigue**

Fatigue, feeling tired or exhausted, is a common symptom of fibromyalgia. Our fatigue could stem from a number of potential sources.

It is very common for fibromyalgia to be accompanied by a sleep disorder, such as insomnia. Many with fibromyalgia can also tell you about countless nights of tossing and turning, being unable to sleep because of the pain they are in, and this is generally referred to as painsomnia.

It has also been found that people with fibromyalgia frequently do not have a good quality of sleep. This is due to bursts of brain activity that interrupts the deep sleep and REM cycles. That is what accounts for the mornings that you wake up after a full night's sleep, but rather than feeling rested, you feel like you have been awake for days.

There is also the issue that pain itself uses up energy and can leave you feeling exhausted and worn out. It has also been suggested that fatigue is merely an inherent symptom of fibromyalgia itself. This could be due to the immune system working overtime trying to fight off fibromyalgia, and it’s many symptoms, but it is not known for

sure at this time.

**Cognitive Fatigue**

Along with feelings of physical fatigue, there also comes mental or cognitive fatigue, known as brain fog.

Most of us can attest to being forgetful, having periods of confusion and being unable to concentrate, and the difficulty is remembering commonly used words.

Cognitive fatigue is aptly called brain fog because that is exactly what it feels like. It is like being outside on a very foggy day, you may be able to make out shapes in the distance, but you cannot clearly see them.

Some possible causes of this may stem from lack of adequate sleep, from being in chronic pain, or because of a decrease of oxygen to the brain due to a central nervous system disturbance.

**Joint and Muscle Stiffness**

Feeling stiff and having difficulty moving, is another common complaint. This stiffness in our joints and/or muscles seems to occur first thing in the morning upon waking up typically. But it can happen other times, such as after sitting in one position for too long, or possibly even at random.

The reason we mainly experience stiffness in the morning, is likely due to reduced blood flow to the muscles, leading to a buildup of lactic acid, thus causing stiffness.

Some may find they begin to loosen up after a few minutes, but for others, it may take hours.

**Stomach and Digestive Problems**

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) and other stomach and digestive problems are commonly seen in those with fibromyalgia.

Many with fibromyalgia report having stomach pain, excess gas, bloating, nausea, constipation, diarrhea, acid reflux, or gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD).

While the exact connection between fibromyalgia and IBS is not fully understood, it is clear there is some link between the two. “In general, it is likely that they coexist for years, but they can flare at the same time or at different times,” according to Lin Chang, MD, co-director of the Oppenheimer Center for Neurobiology of Stress.

**Depression and Anxiety**

It is not difficult to understand why a person living with the many symptoms of fibromyalgia may also develop depression, anxiety, or another mental health condition. That said, depression and anxiety disorders are so closely linked in many cases that it is possible these are symptoms of fibromyalgia itself.

There is also a possibility that depression and certain anxiety disorders may be the cause of fibromyalgia in some instances. The way mental illnesses affect our brain and body can affect our nervous system and may result in developing chronic pain and fibromyalgia.

**Hormonal Imbalances**

In many instances, women with fibromyalgia have abnormally painful menstrual cramps and other menstrual related pain. Many can also link an increase in their fibromyalgia symptoms to their menstrual cycle.

Woman with fibromyalgia frequently experiences a change in their symptoms, for the better or the worse, during pregnancy or after menopause.

### Headaches

One study found that two out of five people with fibromyalgia also get headaches regularly. Some have tension headaches, and others experience migraines.

In some cases, tension headaches could be directly connected to tense muscles in the neck and shoulders.

It is believed that migraines are caused by an abnormality in the central nervous system, leading to a narrowing and inflammation of the blood vessels in your head. Migraines generally cause severe headaches, but they may also cause a variety of other symptoms, like visual disturbances; nausea and vomiting; dizziness; and more.

### Muscle Spasms

Fibromyalgia can also cause excruciating muscle spasms called muscular rheumatism.

A muscle spasm is a contraction of the muscle, and it is sudden and painful. A spasm may last only a few seconds, but can last for several minutes and may happen repeatedly. These spasms tend to occur in one particular muscle group, occurring most commonly at night.

This could be caused by many reasons, including micro blood circulation changes, resulting in constriction of their capillaries in the tissues where the muscle spasm occurs; myofascial trigger points; overactive nerves; or nutrient deficiencies, to name a few.

*Next page: More symptoms of fibromyalgia including sensitivity to lights, sounds, and chemicals, and tips for coping with fibromyalgia symptoms.*

## Fibromyalgia Symptoms

### Sensitivity to Lights and Sounds

Sensory overload from light and sounds is very common for people with fibromyalgia. This will often lead to increased pain, fatigue, brain fog, and more.

According to fibromyalgia researcher and neurology professor, Benjamin Natelson, MD, the uncomfortable and painful sensations of fibromyalgia may be part of our brain’s unusual way of processing pain.

Sensory overload is frequently linked to generalized hypervigilance, which is also common in people with anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This means that we are on high alert, even when we don’t need to be. The cause of this is unknown but may have to do with an issue in our nervous system.

### Sensitivity to Chemicals

Another common affliction for those with fibromyalgia is a sensitivity to many chemicals. This is caused by multiple chemical sensitivity syndrome (MCS).

MCS causes reactions to multiple chemical substances. And even though the reaction may be similar to that of an allergy, it does differ from an allergic reaction. One difference being, MCS does not cause any permanent damage in the way that an allergy possibly can.

While it is true MCS is not likely to cause any permanent harm, like many fibromyalgia symptoms, it can severely limit your ability to function.

Some of the possible symptoms of MCS include:

- Burning, stinging eyes.
- Wheezing, breathlessness.
- Extreme fatigue.
- A headache.
- Dizziness.
- Poor memory and concentration.
- A runny nose.
- Sore or burning throat.
- A cough.
- An earache, ringing in the ears.
- Skin rashes and/or itching.
- Sensitivity to light and noise.
- Sleeping problems.
- Digestive upset.
- Muscle and joint pain.

**How to Cope with Fibromyalgia Symptoms**

For the time being, there is no known cure for fibromyalgia. There are however many treatment methods that can help you to reduce fibromyalgia symptoms and make living with this chronic illness more bearable.

**Medication**

Some medications have been beneficial for many with fibro. Your doctor may prescribe you medicine that helps with pain and sleep.

A number of medicines that were originally formulated for other illnesses, such as depression, and seizures have shown to help some with fibromyalgia pain. Some doctors may prescribe muscle relaxers to help with pain, stiff muscles, and improve quality of sleep.

**Vitamins and Supplements**

There are also several vitamins and natural supplements that have helped many with reducing fibromyalgia symptoms.

Vitamin D3, magnesium, 5-Htp, SAMe, and potassium are a few that can potentially help relieve some of the pain, fatigue, and/or mood-related symptoms of fibromyalgia.

Before taking anything new, natural or otherwise, it is best to talk to your doctor and do research to make sure that what you want to take will not interfere with anything else you are currently taking.

It is also important to note that each individual with fibromyalgia reacts differently to medication and natural treatments. What helps one person may not help you, and vice versa. What gives one-person bad side effects may not be an issue for you. We all have to find what works best for us.

**Lifestyle Changes**

The principal way to cope with fibromyalgia is with lifestyle changes. Trying to pretend that everything is the same as it has always been, or trying to keep up with our able-bodied counterparts is just going to lead to more problems for us in the long run.

- **Pace yourself because balance is critical.** Learn your personal limits and try to stay within them. Even on good days, schedule regular periods of rest throughout the day. On your bad days, take things slow. But beware, a complete lack of activity will make pain worse in the long run.
- As difficult as it is to exercise when you have chronic pain and fatigue, **exercising on a regular basis will**

**help improve your symptoms and quality of life.** Gentle stretches, yoga, Pilates, or tai chi have been helpful for some with fibromyalgia. Strength training has also been proven to be beneficial for people with fibromyalgia, make sure you start slowly and take necessary precautions.

- **Improve your sleep habits.** Sleep is a vital component to feeling your best with fibromyalgia. To get the best quality of sleep possible, you must practice good sleep habits. Try to wake up and go to bed at the same time every day. Use aromatherapy, such as lavender essential oils, to help your mind and body to relax and get a better night's sleep. And reduce the amount of caffeine that you intake each day.
- **Reduce your stress.** Easier said than done? I know! But finding ways to better cope with stress will help your fibromyalgia symptoms. Take time each day to relax, even if it is as little as five minutes. Say no when you need to, without feeling guilty.
- **Do deep-breathing exercises or practice mindfulness.** Take time to do things that you enjoy on a regular basis. Spend time in nature. Pray. Listen to calming music or nature sounds. Do something creative. Journal your thoughts and feelings. Have a gratitude journal.

**Alternative Treatments**

- **Heat and/or cold therapy can be beneficial for many with fibromyalgia.** Things such as hot water bottles, heating pads, and heated blankets have been helpful for many to ease their pain. I refer to my heating pad as my best friend, as in many instances, it can help relieve pain when nothing else can. Others use ice packs to help numb some of their pain, or they rotate between heat and cold.
- **Acupuncture** has been found to help many with pain, anxiety, and other symptoms of fibromyalgia.
- **Massage therapy** can help to relax the muscles, improve joint mobility, and lessen the pain for some with fibromyalgia. Massage can also be beneficial for relieving stress and anxiety.
- **Chiropractry** may help with fibromyalgia pain and stiffness by making adjustments to your spine and skeletal structure.

## The Bottom Line

Finding a fibromyalgia treatment that will help you most may take some time and effort. But it is indeed worthwhile to find what will bring you relief from these fibromyalgia symptoms we discussed and all other symptoms that you live with.

It is important for you to remember that you must find the right combination of things that will help you the most. Only you know what you need and what works the best for you.

Finding relief is possible, and you must remember that you are not alone in your journey to find it!