Connection Between Fibromyalgia and Digestion Problems

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Fibromyalgia and Digestion

As if muscle pain and tissue tenderness weren't enough, many fibromyalgia patients must also put up with a variety of digestive problems on a daily basis. The pain and discomfort can get so bad you don't know where to begin to find relief, and you may simply give up on a comfortable lifestyle.

If this sounds familiar, know you're not alone: up to 70 percent of fibro sufferers also suffer from irritable bowel syndrome symptoms, including gas and bloating, constipation and diarrhea.

Luckily, there are several steps you can take to get some relief, beginning with a better understanding of the connections and communication happening within your body.

How Fibromyalgia Can Trigger Digestive Distress

Although specific causes of digestion problems can be difficult to track down, there are a few strong theories to explain the undeniable connection between fibro symptoms and GI distress.

Fibromyalgia and IBS

It's no coincidence that fibro pain and intestinal pain go hand in hand. Recent studies have used brain scans to match physiological responses in IBS patients and fibromyalgia patients.

Not only do both groups of patients show greater neurological responses to pain, but IBS and fibro patients also seem to experience a heightened awareness of pain. Since they show such similar brain activity in regard to pain stimulus, experts suspect that the two conditions share underlying causes.

The Nervous System Response

Another explanation for the range of GI discomforts affecting fibro patients involves the autonomic nervous system, which regulates the function of the internal organs. This general nervous system is composed of two subsystems: the sympathetic and the parasympathetic nervous systems, which rarely work simultaneously.

In fibromyalgia, the sympathetic nervous system (responsible for an increase in blood pressure, heart rate and adrenaline) is almost constantly engaged, leaving the parasympathetic system (responsible for relaxation and digestion) sluggish or inactive.

Food Intolerance

Many people with fibromyalgia complain that certain foods irritate their stomach or exacerbate their fibro symptoms in other parts of their body. Any food could be a trigger, and while diary and gluten are common

culprits, many people have a unique set of food intolerances that can be difficult to identify without lots of time and careful attention.

Fibromyalgia and Digestion: Common Ailments

The gastrointestinal system is made up of several parts: the esophagus, stomach, small intestine and bowel. When digestion slows down, or an intolerance disrupts the natural process, a chain of events can push pain and discomfort through your entire GI tract.

Fibro patients often complain of frustrating digestive troubles, like:

- **Acid reflux.** When gastric juices are not used in the stomach, they tend to travel back up through the esophagus, resulting in heartburn or a painful sensation in the chest.
- **Cramping and constipation.** When the process of peristalsis (the smooth muscle contraction that moves food through the tubes of the GI tract) slows down, your irritated intestines can begin to cramp and prevent the movement of waste through the bowel.
- **Diarrhea.** When the digestive process slows or halts, undigested food can move from the stomach and into the intestine, where it can irritate the lining of the colon and produce IBS symptoms.
- **Gas.** The longer food stays in your stomach and intestines, the longer your natural GI bacteria has to break down the compounds, and the more methane gas is produced from bacteria metabolism.

IBS is a distinct condition caused by abnormalities in the nerves that supply the digestive tract, and physicians often use the ROME criteria to diagnosis the disorder. If your doctor isn't convinced that your symptoms fit in with IBS, don't throw in the towel just yet; there are several ways to address your digestive problems, regardless of whether you have overlapping conditions or fibro-triggered GI pain.

Next page: natural treatments for digestive problems, and safe and effective medications.

Natural Treatments for Digestive Problems and Fibro Pain

Since what you eat and drink directly affects your digestive system (and indirectly affects every other system) begin to mend your digestive breakdown with your food choices, supplements and meal habits.

In some cases, one change can make a world of difference, and some find that a total dietary makeover relieves their discomfort for good.

Follow an Elimination Diet

By eliminating any and all suspect foods from your diet for several weeks, then reintroducing them one by one, you can find out if any one ingredient has been causing your digestive problems. Remember to wait several days between reintroductions in order to easily isolate the culprit. There's no universal problem food, but watch out for caffeine, dairy, beans, citrus fruit and cruciferous veggies, which have all been known to cause stomach cramps, and both constipation and diarrhea in susceptible people.

Add Soluble Fiber

If your tummy troubles mainly involve gas, bloating and constipation, you may want to try a soluble fiber supplement. In a recent study of IBS patients conducted by researchers out of New York's Beth Israel Medical Center, about 9 percent of patients found relief with a boost in soluble fiber.

Use Peppermint Oil

Many people are suspicious of holistic alternatives, but the same study out of New York returned surprising results on the use of peppermint oil: an astounding 40% of IBS patients found that peppermint extract relieved

their discomfort. Peppermint has been shown to improve the function of the stomach and intestinal muscles, and it has a calm numbing effect on the entire GI tract. Look for high volatile oil peppermint tea, or enteric-coated peppermint oil capsules for an appropriate dose of the therapeutic herb.

Make Gradual Changes to Your Diet

A big swing in the healthy direction may seem like a good idea, but any sweeping change can shock your system. Avoid the unnecessary discomfort by making little changes over time: the first step is to eliminate processed food and additives (they contain unnatural compounds that are incredibly difficult to digest), and then consider an elimination diet, or increasing whole grains while lowering saturated fat.

Safe and Effective Medications for Both Conditions

Although the root causes of IBS and fibromyalgia are still not entirely understood, the fact that they're physiologically related suggests that certain treatments could help both conditions.

While no one medication has been shown to relieve symptoms for everyone, some options include:

- Antispasmodic medication (drugs like Levsin and Bentyl may help relax your digestive tract)
- Antidepressants (some antidepressants can relieve abdominal pain, and help with constipation)
- Anti-anxiety medications (both IBS and fibromyalgia flares can be triggered by anxiety)

Nothing can be solved overnight, but rest assured that there is a lot you can do about your digestion as you treat your fibromyalgia. Consider making some dietary changes while you take your prescribed medication, but make sure you don't start or stop any course of medication before consulting with your doctor.

Exercise is an excellent remedy for digestive problems and fibro symptoms, so be sure to stay moderately active most days, if not every day of the week. Often, a change in your diet and exercise regime can bring the quickest – and most powerful – results.