Can Physical Therapy Help Fibromyalgia?

by STARLA RICH

Physical Therapy For Fibromyalgia

Those with fibromyalgia know the importance of exploring what best works to alleviate pain, reduce stress, renew energy, and improve flexibility and function.

One of the most beneficial plans of treatment for me as a fibro warrior was a time of physical therapy. Because pain is chronic and severe, we tend to limit our movement which only worsens symptoms.

Muscles knot up, joints become stiff, damaged nerves increase in numbness and sensitivity. The many facets of physical therapy – heat, massage, light exercise and movement, hydrotherapy, and electromagnetic massage all stimulate the body and work out pain while increasing energy and combatting fatigue.

Simply put, exercise can help you manage fibromyalgia pain, and physical therapy is a great and safe way to get the exercise you need.

What Is Physical Therapy?

Physical therapy focuses on treatment, healing, and prevention. It helps you regain control of your fibromyalgia as you focus on lifestyle changes rather than on the chronic problems of pain, stiffness, and fatigue.

Physical therapy allows for efficient muscle function, reduce fatigue, pain, and muscle tension.

What Is The Role of A Physical Therapists?

Physical therapists teach self-management skills, show how to relieve symptoms of pain and stiffness, how to build strength, and improve range of motion.

They show ways to get relief from deep muscle pain and help FMS patients learn how to make sensible decisions about daily activities that will help prevent painful flare-ups.

How Can a Physical Therapist Help My Fibromyalgia?

A licensed physical therapist has a background in anatomy and kinesiology – the study of movement. The therapist will develop an individualized stretching and strengthening programs. They provide health services that help restore function, improve mobility, relieve pain, and prevent or limit physical disabilities.

Traditionally, a physician will diagnose fibromyalgia then refer a patient to a physical therapist for one-on-one treatment.

How Can Physical Therapy Help Relieve Fibromyalgia Pain?

The benefit of physical therapy in easing pain, stiffness, and fatigue is that it allows a person with fibromyalgia to work closely with a trained professional who can design a fibromyalgia-specific treatment program.

The therapist documents your progress and gauges whether you're practicing good therapy habits, alignments, and movement patterns when doing "homework" or exercises at home.

The ultimate goal of physical therapy to learn the specific treatments and exercises and then do them daily or as needed at home.

The Research

Dr. Anne Reicherter, a licensed physical therapist and associate professor in the department of physical therapy in the School of Medicine of the University of Maryland in Baltimore, says physical therapy can help fibromyalgia patients “manage their daily living with less pain and generally make life more enjoyable.”

She explains that people with fibromyalgia pain are often caught in a vicious cycle: pain and fatigue prevent them from being active and exercising, but inactivity can trigger more pain and fatigue. The less we move, the less we can and want to move.

Physical Therapy Doesn't Just Focus on Pain

Another benefit of physical therapy beyond a reduction in pain is that it is one way to help you get restful, restorative sleep every night. Working with a physical therapist can help you get the exercise you need for a good night’s rest. Reicherter says physical therapy can also eventually reduce the need for pain medication, and possibly even surgery.

One thing I learned from physical therapy was just how destructive fibromyalgia is on our muscles. After warm-up stretch exercises, followed by time on a stationary bike for cardio, my therapist provided a time of deep heat and electromagnetic stimulus. Lastly, was massage. I could feel the knots in my muscles as the therapist worked out those tight, painful areas in my shoulders, neck, and back. Working those muscles out relaxes the body, reduces pain and prepares the body for better rest.

Fibromyalgia patients may find it hard to start an exercise program on their own because they fear it will make their symptoms worse. Had my physician not prescribed physical therapy for me, I would’ve never taken the plunge on my own to press through the pain with exercise and massage.

Having a physical therapist develop a gentle, yet effective program with your particular pain and fatigue levels in mind, you can eliminate the hard part — getting started.

A recent study found that fibromyalgia patients who participated in an exercise program designed for their specific needs showed improvements in their mood, functioning, and physical abilities even six months after the program ended.

Next page: How to find a physical therapist, types of physical therapy for fibromyalgia, and more.

How Can I Find a Licensed Physical Therapist?

In looking for a physical therapist, check whether your health care plan covers visits. Look for physical therapists in their list of providers. Next, look for a trained professional licensed in your state. Find a therapist who has experience in dealing with fibromyalgia. Your doctor may provide a referral.

Places physical therapists can be found:

- Doctor's offices
- Fitness facilities
- Home health agencies
- Hospitals
- Nursing homes
- Outpatient clinics
- Schools

Choosing the Right Physical Therapist for Your Fibromyalgia Pain

The American Physical Therapy Association provides these tips for determining a physical therapist:

- **Check for a license.** It's important that your physical therapist is licensed in your state. If you are receiving therapy from an assistant, make sure a licensed physical therapist supervises them.
- **Get a referral, if needed.** Most states allow you to find a therapist without a physician referral, but it's best to double check.
- **Ask questions about insurance.** Is your physical therapist in your insurance company network? Will this person submit claims for you? Do you have a co-pay, and how much is it? Work out all the money questions before you start your therapy.

Types of Physical Therapy For Fibromyalgia

Physical therapy – is hands-on yet gentle, effective, and will most likely play a major role in managing your fibromyalgia symptoms.

There are a variety of physical therapy techniques. Passive treatments relax your body. Your physical therapy program will usually begin with passive treatments. When you feel ready, you will start active treatments that strengthen your body and prevent further fibromyalgia pain.

Passive Physical Therapy

- **Deep Tissue Massage:** Unless you're in an extreme amount of pain, deep tissue massage is ideal for fibromyalgia because it uses a great deal of pressure to relieve deep muscle tension and spasms. Spasms prevent muscle motion at the affected level, which is one of the reasons people with fibromyalgia experience a decreased range of motion. Physical therapy techniques, including deep tissue massage, will help you use your muscles more effectively.
- **Heat Therapy:** Heat therapy is one of the most preferred methods of reducing chronic aches and pains associated with fibromyalgia. Heat triggers the body's natural healing process by relaxing your muscles and speeding up blood flow to the affected area. Extra blood delivers extra oxygen and nutrients. Blood also removes waste byproducts from muscle spasms. Heat can effectively reduce your pain. This therapy is used in a couple of ways—through dry heat (a heating pad or a dry, hot towel) or moist heat (steam heat or a moist, warm cloth). When using heat therapy on your own after physical therapy ends, never overheat painful areas. If you're using a heating pad, set it to low or medium. When using a hot towel, touch it first to make sure it's not too hot. Excessive heat may not only exacerbate your fibromyalgia pain but also potentially cause burns.
- **Hydrotherapy:** Water treatment is a passive treatment. Hydrotherapy may involve sitting in a whirlpool bath to relieve pain, relax muscles, and condition your body without adding unnecessary stress.
- **Electric Muscle Stimulation:** Electric muscle stimulation sounds intense, but it isn't painful. This technique reduces muscle spasms and is generally believed to trigger the release of endorphins, your body's natural painkillers.
- **Ultrasound:** This therapy uses sound waves to create a gentle heat that increases blood circulation to your deep tissues. Ultrasound helps reduce muscle spasms, inflammation, stiffness, and pain and is most effective in relieving range of motion limitations in chronic pain sufferers.

Active Treatments for Fibromyalgia

Active treatments help address core stability, flexibility, strength, and joint movement. An exercise program may also be prescribed to achieve optimal results. This will not only curb recurrent pain but also benefit your overall health.

- **Stretching.** By increasing flexibility through stretching, tight, stiff muscles loosen up, providing fibromyalgia relief. Your physical therapist can instruct you on the proper way to stretch muscles, tendons, and ligaments. The National Pain Foundation recommends keeping the number of repetitions low — 5 to 10. Holding a stretch for 30 to 60 seconds is good for large muscle groups, with possibly only one to two reps necessary.
- **Core stability:** Your core (abdominal) muscles have a greater impact on your overall health than you may think. Strong core muscles serve as good allies to your back muscles in supporting your spine. A healthy core provides your body with a strong, stable center point.
- **Muscle flexibility and strengthening:** Your range of motion will likely be restricted if you're experiencing fibromyalgia pain. Using customized stretching and strengthening exercises, your physical therapist will help you lengthen and strengthen your muscles and improve joint movement.

Your physical therapist will teach you self-care principles, so you understand how to treat your fibromyalgia symptoms best. The ultimate goal is for you to develop the knowledge to help control your symptoms.

The Bottom Line...

Some fibromyalgia patients say they feel worse after starting therapy, but Dr. Reicherter says this should not happen if you are getting good therapy and are going slowly. Overdoing exercise or activities after you start to feel better can make you feel worse.

Dr. Reicherter also points out that exercise soreness is different from fibromyalgia pain. Once you get used to the exercise, you should start reaping its benefits: less pain every day.