How to Avoid the Flu With Fibromyalgia

by ANGELA FINLAY

Fibromyalgia and the Flu

With contributions from Lana.

Having fibromyalgia is hard enough but add getting sick with fibromyalgia and the flu at the same time is a bad combination. Regardless of whether you have a mild case of the flu or a bad one, you are more likely to feel worse than people without fibromyalgia would, and what's more, being sick can trigger a flare-up of your fibromyalgia symptoms.

Keep on reading to learn more about fibromyalgia and the flu, and how to prevent getting sick during the cold season.

How Does the Flu Affect Fibromyalgia?

Nobody knows how severe a cold or flu will be, but those with fibromyalgia can count on a particularly uncomfortable experience. The problem is fibro symptoms can feed virus symptoms, and vice versa:

Cold Symptoms Can Be More Severe and Last Longer

In fibromyalgia patients, there's a significant decrease in the number of molecules that stick to the surface of white blood cells. These "adhesion molecules" play a big role in directing white blood cells to the infection, destroying invasive organisms, and removing toxic substances.

Without an adequate number of these important molecules, colds, flus, and other infections can hang around for much longer before the immune system can gain the upper hand.

A Virus Can Trigger a Fibromyalgia Flare

The stress of fighting off an invading organism can worsen fibromyalgia symptoms, or trigger a sudden autoimmune response that results in a flare. Some patients report that their fibromyalgia symptoms only began after they had caught a virus.

Chances of Developing a Secondary Bacterial Infection Are Higher

The longer a sickness sticks around in your system, the more chance it has to increase inflammation and further weaken your natural defenses. In turn, your body is at the mercy of other foreign invaders that can bring more serious complications, like tonsillitis, bronchitis, sinusitis or even pneumonia.

Treating the infection with fibromyalgia can cause extra discomfort since antibiotics for bacterial infections and even over-the-counter cold medication tend to irritate the stomach. If you are one of the 70% of fibromyalgia

sufferers who also live with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), you will certainly want to avoid any harsh irritants, which makes prevention even more important.

How to Cope With Fibromyalgia and the Flu

If you do get sick when the flu, there are ways you can help yourself feel better and avoid fibromyalgia flares:

- **Stay hydrated**. Staying hydrated is important to feeling your best with fibromyalgia. It is even more important when you are trying to get better and manage symptoms associated with the flu.
- **Manage fevers**. Acetaminophen (Tylenol) can ease fever and aches and pain associated with the flu or a combination of fibromyalgia and the flu. Acetaminophen is a better option over nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDS), which are known for their negative effects on the gastrointestinal tract.
- **Treat all symptoms**. It is a good idea to ask your doctor about cough and cold medicines to treat flu symptoms that will not interact with any prescription fibromyalgia medications. You should also do what you can to prevent and manage flares.
- **Get plenty of rest**. Adequate rest is important for people with fibromyalgia or the flu. Getting enough rest and sleep can help your body to recover faster.
- **Use heating therapy for muscle pain relief.** Fibro pain can spread and spike rather quickly once an illness takes hold, so use heating pads, progressive muscle relaxation and stretching to keep yourself comfortable while your body overcomes the viral invader.

Ways to Prevent the Flu With Fibromyalgia

While there is little evidence that fibromyalgia directly impairs the immune system, there are a number of ways that it can *indirectly* affect your ability to fight off viruses. A decrease in certain hormones, poor sleep quality, and high-stress levels are some of the most common fibromyalgia discomforts, and they are all known to lower immunity.

Luckily, there are plenty of ways to boost your natural immune response without interfering with your fibro management plan. Many immune-friendly measures can also help to protect and relieve some of your other fibro symptoms.

Rest Up

Restorative sleep is not only important for your energy levels — it's vital for a strong immune system. When you do not get enough quality sleep, your body produces fewer cytokines (proteins that promote immune response), as well as fewer antibodies to fight off infection when the need arises.

Unfortunately, sleep problems are at the top of the symptom list for many fibro sufferers, which can leave them both prone to infection and prone to flare-ups.

Start the season off right with an upgrade to your sleep routine: shut off electronics well before bedtime, go to sleep and get up at the same time each day, and practice some relaxation techniques before you hit the hay. Avoid long naps in the daytime — they may help in the short term, but will likely hurt your chances for restorative sleep.

Eat Well

Vitamins are the name of the game, and fresh fruit and vegetables are by far the best sources of immune-boosting nutrients. Incorporating some key vitamins will help calm fibro symptoms and keep your natural defenses up:

- Vitamin D boosts immunity, and studies have shown that can noticeably reduce your fibro pain.
- Omega-3 fatty acids fight inflammation, which is a major player in fibro symptoms.
- Vitamin C will offer antioxidant support and keep your immune system in good shape.

- SAMe (or S-Adenosyl methionine) is a compound that's crucial for natural immune function. As you age, your body produces less of it, so consider taking a SAMe supplement to reduce your chronic pain, boost your spirits, and keep your body in disease-fighting mode.

Other supplements can be helpful to keep you nutritionally balanced, but there is no substitute for a wholesome diet. Begin by getting rid of additives and preservatives, then add more fatty fish and colorful veggies to your daily menu.

Other Ways to Prevent the Flu

- **Wash your hands.** You pick up and carry around more germs than you may think, so you should be extra vigilant with your hand habits. For instance, wash your hands more often, and be careful not to touch your eyes, mouth or nose — these are gateways for viruses and bacteria. Remember to regularly disinfect the things you use most often: keys, cell phone, doorknobs, light switches, and anything else you touch on a regular basis.
- **Get vaccinated.** As soon as it's available, get the flu shot. There are many misconceptions and mistaken concerns when it comes to the annual flu shot, but doctors agree that there is no doubt about it: getting vaccinated is one of the most important steps for people living with fibromyalgia. Not only will flu symptoms hit you harder than the average person, but there is no evidence that the shot can affect your fibro symptoms or cause any worrying side effects.

The Takeaway

The bottom line is that people with fibromyalgia should be especially vigilant to avoid getting sick with the flu. They should take the necessary precautions to ensure this.

If you are hesitant to get a flu shot because it has caused a fibromyalgia flare in the past or other side effects, it is a good idea to consider how bad your flare-ups can get when you are sick. If your flu symptoms are mild, and you do not flare up easily with illness, then opting out might make sense. Likewise, if you know the flu will knock you out and trigger a flare, it probably is a good idea to get a shot.