Is Constant Back Pain Normal in Fibromyalgia Sufferers?

by STARLA RICH

Is Fibromyalgia Back Pain Normal?

If you suffer from the pain of fibromyalgia, chances are you deal with back pain as well. These two chronic pain conditions often go hand-in-hand, and many experts feel they should be treated both together and individually as some of the triggers and symptoms can be inter-related.

As many as two-thirds of people with chronic lower back pain also have fibromyalgia. Looking at the numbers from the other direction, up to 49 percent of people with fibromyalgia have lower back pain. In fact, back pain is so prevalent among people with fibromyalgia that it was once one of the symptoms doctors looked for in making a fibromyalgia diagnosis.

Both these chronic pain conditions are challenging and intense at times. Although the roots of the two conditions differ, the painful experiences of the two conditions bear some similarities.

Among them is the sense that these chronic pain conditions cause you to be on a “high alert” setting of sorts (doctors call it hyperarousal). And then, to top it off, the pain wears you down, causing fatigue, depression, and anxiety that make living with fibromyalgia and back pain even more draining.

Before determining treatment for either of these conditions, it is important to discover the origin of them. As the statistics show, back pain can be the widespread pain that fibromyalgia produces. However, there can also be conditions and/or injuries that are producing the back pain apart from fibromyalgia.

Starla's Coping Experience With Fibromyalgia and Back Pain

For me, I was diagnosed with herniated and degenerative discs before a diagnosis of fibromyalgia. I also had an injury from twisting my lower back that was unrelated to fibromyalgia.

However, because of the “hypersensitivity” that fibromyalgia produces, my back pain along with the other pains of fibromyalgia, seems magnified. Because of this, it was important when I was sent for therapy and participating in exercise and massage, and to be aware of those injured and degenerative areas so as not to produce further damage.

During therapy, it was determined that I would need surgery for removal of two of the degenerative discs and to take care of spinal stenosis because my spine had narrowed to the point of a “1” and dangerously close to pinching my spine. After surgery, I was told it would be 4-6-week recovery time.

However, most doctors do not take into consideration the fact that it takes a fibro sufferer much longer to recover from traumatic issues such as surgery. Even being given steroid shots, epidurals required longer recovery time. It took me nine weeks before I was also able to drive or do anything on my own.

If you have degenerative disc disease and fibromyalgia, it is important to utilize the most effective but least invasive options for treating lower back pain. Like fibro, it can feel progressive. However, many experts on treating back pain believe that degenerative disc disease is more of a waxing and waning pain syndrome due to normal wear or aging.

Fibromyalgia-Related Back Pain

As statistics prove, if you have fibromyalgia, then you have likely experienced fibromyalgia related back pain. With many nerves and muscles in the back and around the spine, this is a vulnerable area for anyone but especially those with fibromyalgia and chronic pain issues. Chronic pain management techniques are often called for with every kind of back, spine and/or nerve related pain.

With fibromyalgia, lower back pain is easily exacerbated mostly during activities of daily living. This can occur when trigger points are both present and/or active and radiate pain from the lower back into the SI joints, hip flexors, glutes, and pelvic area.

The involvement with SI (Sacroiliac) joints on the upper side on the buttocks also radiates pain to the lower back and even into the pelvic area. Sitting or standing for long periods of time can keep these areas tight and radiating.

For those with more severe fibro, even shorter periods of sitting can pose the same issue and should be limited, especially with a tendency toward inflammation within the SI joints of the lower back.

Fibromyalgia and Sciatica

While it is commonly accepted that lower back pain is associated with fibromyalgia, the jury is still out on whether sciatica can be caused by fibromyalgia or be an underlying condition.

Since sciatica can be defined by causes, while much is still unknown about fibromyalgia, it is still possible to point out that certain situations that are more likely with a person suffering from fibromyalgia, can also be triggers for sciatic pain as well.

Many fibro sufferers do also suffer from sciatica. Prolonged sitting, as well as having long-term trigger points due to fibromyalgia may very well expand to trigger areas that could bring on irritation of the sciatic nerve.

Some symptoms of sciatica are the same as those of fibromyalgia as well as those with disc injury or disease…

- Tingling
- Burning
- Numbness
- Weakness

Again, this is why it is so important for proper diagnosis when you are experiencing lower back pain. Damaged discs and pinched nerves do not need to be confused with fibromyalgia, as irreparable damage could occur if left untreated.

Treatments for Fibromyalgia Back Pain Relief

Pain medication is usually part of the prescription for fibromyalgia symptoms but often isn’t enough for most people, especially if a back condition is involved. Putting together a multipart pain plan is important. This is even truer if you need specific therapy for your back.

Below are both traditional and alternative approaches towards a comprehensive treatment strategy:

- **Lifestyle changes.** Both back pain and fibromyalgia symptoms may improve as you work on a healthier lifestyle — adjusting your diet, increasing exercise, and losing weight if needed.

- **Mental health treatment.** Anxiety, depression, and trouble sleeping can all make pain feel worse. Comprehensive treatment strategies may include therapy to better cope with depression and anxiety.
- **Physical therapy.** Physical therapists can teach you how to move through your day more effectively and show you stretches to ease back pain and perhaps make living with fibromyalgia easier.
- **Alternative treatment.** Acupuncture, biofeedback, and music therapy can help ease back pain. Pain management specialists are well-versed in the complexity of pain treatment and will be open to any questions you might have about alternative approaches.
- **Education.** Finally, a little knowledge can go a long way toward easing some of the anxiety you may be feeling. Talk with your medical team about the physiology of pain and the complex factors that influence your perception of pain when you are facing conditions related to hypersensitization.

When you're struggling with low back pain and fibromyalgia, you might feel as though you're fighting two battles. But a combination of therapies — some aimed at fibromyalgia, some aimed at the back pain, and some aimed at both — is more likely to bring you symptom relief.