Water Therapy for Fibromyalgia May Help Pain

by STARLA RICH

Fibromyalgia and Water Therapy

Spring is here — the time of year when life begins to stir again and activities increase as people make their way outdoors.

This can be scary and frustrating for those dealing with fibromyalgia. As much as we want to participate, some days, it takes all one can muster to get moving. Still, moving is exactly what you need to be doing!

If you are suffering from fibromyalgia, at this very moment you are doing something you may not even be aware of — clenching, an involuntary reaction to stress that leads to more pain.

This is why a stressful lifestyle and too much time spent sitting or laying down is like double jeopardy for those suffering with fibromyalgia pain. It is natural for us to avoid activity when we're in pain, but movement is exactly what we need.

The Value of Exercise in Pain Management

Studies show that if a person can develop a routine of exercising three times a week, even low impact exercises, it will help control fibromyalgia pain and muscle tenderness. Exercise also relieves fatigue and depression, and helps people feel better about themselves and more in charge of their lives. Exercise helps your mood, helps you sleep better and helps your pain.

But it's easier said than done sometimes isn't it? I know for me personally as a FM sufferer, exercise is a difficult task on some days. Though once I get moving I feel so much better and can accomplish more after loosening those achy, tense muscles.

If traditional exercise such as walking or stretching or even yoga is too painful, there is another alternative that could be an ideal solution – especially as the warmer weather approaches. That solution is water aerobics, or water therapy as it is sometimes called.

Why Water Therapy?

If you stay extremely stiff or live with a high level of pain each day, traditional exercise is a daunting task, but water therapy is a wonderful place to start for developing an exercise routine. It is also a great alternative for those dealing with obesity in addition to their fibromyalgia.

- **Warm water from a shower or bath can be very comforting — it is the same with water therapy in a pool.** Water aerobics get blood flow to muscles and tendons without stressing your joints.
- **Water offers resistance, which helps muscles get stronger.** It actually provides a three-dimensional resistance to movement so muscles develop more equally in all directions.

- **Water applies hydrostatic pressure to bodies immersed in it, which reduces swelling and discomfort.** So, exercising in water helps improve fitness while treating your pain at the same time.
- **The natural buoyancy of water helps you move and allows you to exercise in ways that would otherwise be painful.** It eliminates painful tissues and joints and provides an ease of movement that is not possible with routine exercise for those suffering with fibromyalgia.
- **You don't need to know how to swim.** Should you sign up for aquatic therapy or a water aerobics class, the instructor will conduct the workout in shallow water and if you are taken to the deeper end of the pool, you bob in deep water with a foam belt, floatation devices or a life jacket.

Whether you choose water aerobics under the care of an instructor, a physical therapist in a heated facility or in your own backyard pool, it is a wonderful way to implement exercise into your weekly routine.

The good news about structured aquatic therapy is that most insurers, workers' comp and private companies pay for or reimburse the therapy if prescribed by a licensed medical professional.

Next page: water aerobics exercises for fibromyalgia.

Water Aerobics and Total Body Fitness

Lynda Huey and Robert Forster developed a water protocol specifically for those dealing with fibromyalgia. Below are some techniques outlined in *The Complete Waterpower Workout Book:*

- **Deep water warm-up:** Slow low-impact warm-up exercises to loosen muscles and prepare for more intense workouts.
- **Deep-water interval training:** An interval training session is created by combining three skills — deep water running, deep water walking and flies (hip and shoulder ab/adduction) — in the deep water. Warm-up speed is varied to create alternate periods of work and rest.
- **Deep-water power exercises:** The following exercise for fibromyalgia help strengthen the body gently and safely*:* sit kicks, heel lifts, bent-knee twists, quick scissors, v-kicks and deep back kicks.
- **Kick training:** All of the following kicks target the muscles of the hips, thighs and buttocks: front and back flutter kick, bicycle kick, straight-leg deep kick and slap kick. Therefore, the lower extremities are reconditioned without any impact or undue fatigue. Patient's shoulders are protected by doing these exercises in a corner or on a step.
- **Upper extremity exercises:** This series of range-of-motion exercises helps shoulders and arms gain strength, flexibility and function, including front/back pull, dig deep, biceps/triceps curl.
- **Swimming or assisted swimming:** Most patients do either a combined stroke (breaststroke with flutter kick) or a modified backstroke. The backstroke modifications apply the least amount of pressure on the neck, upper back and shoulders.
- **Watsu:** This relaxation technique yields the greatest pain relief for fibromyalgia patients. The therapist cradles the patient in their arms, and then gently rotates their own body from side to side, which causes the patient's limbs to sway. During this motion, the patient floats with eyes closed and ears in the water, creating sensory deprivation, which relaxes and breaks the pain cycle.
- **Waterpower workout exercises:** These low-impact jumping exercises are optional and used only on days when a patient has little pain and feels strong and energetic. Exercises such as lunges, crossovers, squat jumps, side straddles, leg swings, front kicks, back kicks and frog jumps give patients a sense of athleticism they don't normally possess.

Make It Your Own

These techniques are extremely successful under the supervision of a water aerobics instructor or aquatic therapist. However, if you choose to implement water aerobics on your own, perhaps it doesn't have to be complicated. The biggest step, as they say, is getting started.

Most of all, make it fun! It is springtime and before you know it, the kids will be ready for the pool, the beach and

all things outdoors. Spouses will be ready to enjoy the sun or the gym and friends will gravitate to each other beyond their wintry walls of isolation.

What better way to develop an exercise routine than enjoying fun in the sun around water with friends and family? Don’t be shy — you just may get them into better shape as well. Rather than being excluded from social interaction due to your pain or fatigue, water therapy is a wonderful way to interact.