How to Manage Fibromyalgia in the Cold Weather

by BARBARA LEECH

Tips for Dealing With Fibromyalgia and Cold Weather

The colder months of the year are not kind to the people who are living with fibromyalgia. Keeping up with the sudden weather changes can be an extra challenge. But what exactly is the connection between fibromyalgia and cold weather?

How Does the Cold Weather Affect People With Fibromyalgia?

Cold affects me horribly — I get cold and it feels like I simply cannot warm up. My muscles and joints hurt, and the pain can get quite bad.

By cold, I mean any day below 60F can hurt me. Granted, I have other conditions that make me intolerant to the cold (Raynaud's disease, lupus and thyroid disease), but I feel the cold also impacts my fibromyalgia greatly.

All of my comorbid conditions seem to come together as I stand in that dugout, shivering. Often, my pain level reaches a point where I am fighting back the urge to just let the tears flow.

I don't, of course. I keep going, persevere and pay the price of pain that can last for a few days that follow. Usually, the next game or practice occurs before I have had a chance to fully recover. It is a horrible cycle and a struggle I keep mostly to myself.

My silence has a price though. I don't get the help I need when I try and keep silent about my health, and I start to get resentful and moody because I am so tired of having to be strong.

What the Research Says about Fibromyalgia and Cold Weather

Most researchers agree that fibromyalgia is a disorder of central processing with neuroendocrine and neurotransmitter dysregulation. Those who suffer from the disorder experience pain amplification due to abnormal sensory processing in the central nervous system.

An increasing number of scientific studies now show multiple physiological abnormalities in a fibromyalgia patient, including increased levels of substance P in the spinal cord, low levels of blood flow to the thalamus region of the brain, HPA axis hypofunction, low levels of serotonin and tryptophan and abnormalities in cytokine function.

One study I read about found an enormous increase in the number of sensory nerve fibers within the blood vessels of the skin — especial on the palms of hands. The research was done by a team led by Dr. Frank Rice, a neuroscientist and president of Integrated Tissue Dynamics (INTiDYN), as well as pain specialist Dr. Charles Argoff, a neurologist at Albany Medical Center in New York.

It determined that in the hands and feet, the blood vessels act as shunts, helping to speed blood flow and regulate

body temperature. So, with increased nerve fibers, the fibromyalgia sufferer feels this regulation of blood flow as pain. The study concluded that blood vessels attempt to open up blood flow more when it is cold, which results in exaggerated levels of pain.

Research also shows that a cold breeze can cause muscle spasms in a fibromyalgia patient.

Tips for Coping With Fibromyalgia and Cold Weather

It's time to bundle up and take on the cold weather with fibromyalgia. Below are a few ways you can increase your body's temperature during the cooler and colder months.

1. Take a Warm Bath

Studies have shown that taking warm or hot baths can have a therapeutic effect on fibromyalgia pain. In fact, researchers believe taking a warm bath after being out in an uncomfortably chilly day will help you recover faster.

It is believed it has a secondary effect of warming your bones and taking away any chill that remains in the body contributes to fibromyalgia pain and symptoms.

2. Dress in Loose, Warm Layers

Clothes that restrict blood flow seem to cause more pain. I dress in layers that are fairly loose and trap in my body heat. They also allow me to quickly adjust to changes in the weather (say the sun comes out and it warms up a bit) by removing a layer as needed.

It is also vital to have gloves, hats and scarves, no matter how silly you may feel about wearing them in May. Get them in colors you like and wear them with pride!

Essentially, if it feels cold to you, bundle up as needed. One tip I read about suggested wearing wool t-shirts and socks because wool keeps the muscles warm and relaxed while wicking away the moisture from excess sweating .

3. Use Hand Warmers

Store-bought hand warmers can also ease fibromyalgia symptoms. Place them in your pockets and stick your hands inside as needed.

This can keep your whole body warmer too, because proper blood flow is crucial to overall warmth of the body.

Managing days where you must be outside in chilly, damp weather is a challenge for some of us with fibromyalgia. But by taking a few precautions and warming the body back up after it has been chilled, you can decrease your level of pain and the duration of the overall discomfort.