Using Topical Treatments for Fibro Pain

by ANGELA FINLAY

What Is the Most Effective Fibromyalgia Topical Treatment?

Physical therapy and lifestyle change play important roles in any fibromyalgia treatment plan, but there's room for simpler treatments, too. Although they're not a first line of defense, some topical creams can reduce the pain and discomfort of fibromyalgia, as long as you choose wisely and use them safely.

Best Ingredients for Fibromyalgia Pain Relief

Plenty of pain-relieving creams have flooded the market, and it can be difficult to know which claims to trust. Instead of throwing away your money through trial and error, look out for the key ingredients that have proven pain relief benefits:

- **Salicylates.** The active ingredient in aspirin is also used in some topical creams. Many sufferers find that cream with salicylates brings more relief to the fingers, elbow and knees — joints that are close to the skin.
- **Counterirritants.** Creams and gels with menthol, camphor and methyl salicylate fall under this category. They typically have a tingling effect, which can be slightly numbing or simply distracting; in either case, the relief is more superficial than other treatments. They likely won't do much for deep fibro pain, but they can bring some general comfort.
- **Capsaicin.** This fiery compound found in hot peppers is one of the most effective tools for safe, long-term treatment. Although you may have to get used to the slight burning sensation, using a cream with capsaicin for a few weeks can bring incredible relief to fibromyalgia pain.

Of the three types of topical treatments, capsaicin could hold the most promise because of how it affects the nerves. It works by destroying something called "substance P," a peptide that's released when your nervous system is stimulated. Since substance P is responsible for carrying pain signals to your brain, the less your cells produce, the less pain you will feel.

Risks and Precautions for Topical Treatments

Regardless of how mild the medication may be, side effects are always a possibility. There are a few precautions to keep in mind when using topical pain treatments:

Dosage

The correct dosage can mean the difference between soothing relief and painful side effects. For instance, an overdose of salicylates can cause gastrointestinal upset and impaired platelet function. For capsaicin creams, a starting dose of 0.025% is recommended, and if that's not effective, your doctor might allow an increase to 0.075% capsaicin.

Pay close attention not only to the label but also to your doctor's recommendations.

Interactions With Other Treatments

Topical creams are generally safe to use with oral medication, but you can't assume all your fibromyalgia treatments will go well together. Avoid using heating pads where you've applied your pain relief cream, don't use creams or gels under a tight bandage, and beware of salicylates if you have an allergy to aspirin, or are taking blood thinners.

Safety Measures

To protect your hands from the burning effect of capsaicin, wear gloves for each application. Always read the labels, and save the inserts in case you have a delayed reaction. Be extra careful not to touch your eyes, nostrils or any other mucus membranes if you've been handling medicated cream.

Keep a record of the topical treatments you try (and their effects) in your pain journal, so you can track how well they work or how poorly they react to other aspects of your treatment plan. Since everybody's different, no one cream or gel is guaranteed to bring relief, but there's a good chance you'll be able to find one that works reasonably well for your discomfort.