6 Easy Ways to Help Manage and Cope With Fibromyalgia Symptoms

by LANA BARHUM

Easy Ways to Manage the Most Common Fibromyalgia Symptoms

Increased sensitivity to pain is the primary symptom of fibromyalgia. Of course, you know it is not the only symptom. Below are the most commons symptoms of fibromyalgia and how to manage and cope with widespread pain, joint stiffness, fatigue, sleep, fibro fog, anxiety and depression.

Widespread Pain

Fibromyalgia pain affects the muscles, ligaments and tendons of the body. The pain can even be felt in the bursa, the sacs surrounding the joints that provide your body with nutrients and lubrication for movement.

Sometimes, fibromyalgia pain is localized to specific areas, but most people have pain in all four quadrants of the body. Moreover, all people with fibromyalgia feel pain at various tender points throughout their bodies.

Tender points are areas where muscles and joints meet. The most common tender point locations are the neck, shoulders, lower back, waist, ribs, buttocks, and knees.

For some people with fibromyalgia, muscle pain can be quite debilitating to the point it physically disables them. For others, pain is mild and does not affect normal life.

Fibromyalgia has been described as deep and persistent or stabbing, throbbing, and shooting. The pain may also cause skin burning and tingling.

Regardless of the kind of pain, it can increase in severity throughout the day or travel to other parts of the body. In fact, fibromyalgia for most of us is all-over body pain.

Coping With and Managing Widespread Pain

Fibromyalgia pain can be managed with pain relievers, antidepressants, anticonvulsants, exercise, physical therapy and acupuncture. Your doctor may recommend over-the-counter or prescription pain relievers to reduce inflammation, minimize muscle pain and to help you sleep.

Antidepressant medications, such as Cymbalta, can help with pain, but they come with unpleasant side effects. Talk to your doctor about side effects and ways to minimize these.

Anticonvulsants, also called anti-seizure drugs, may help reduce your pain. Lyrica and Gabapentin are the most common anticonvulsants used to treat fibromyalgia, but they can cause side effects, such as dizziness, weight gain, swelling and dry skin and mouth.

Exercise can be challenging for people with fibromyalgia, but physical therapy is a viable alternative for improving

your range of motion and strengthening your muscles. A physical therapist can create a program specifically for you that you can use at home on a daily basis.

Research shows fibromyalgia patients who participate in yoga classes have less pain and fatigue and improved moods. One 2014 international study out of the Oregon Health & Science University, Portland, Oregon, USA, finds many people with fibromyalgia practice yoga and find it beneficial and therapeutic. Yoga includes gentle stretching, breathing exercises and meditation, and the practice increases muscle strength and teaches you to relax better.

Acupuncture is another option for fibromyalgia pain relief. The practice involves pricking the skin with needles to:

- Promote self-healing
- Encourage blood flow
- Change how brain neurotransmitters respond
- Treat a variety of chronic pain conditions

One study reported in the *Journal of Rehabilitative Medicine* finds people with fibromyalgia who try acupuncture benefit from pain relief for up to two years, this compared to those who did not. Acupressure is an option if you do not like or cannot tolerate needles.

The risks of acupuncture are soreness, bruising and minor bleeding. Make sure the acupuncturist you choose is licensed to avoid infection from unsterilized needles.

Morning Stiffness

Morning stiffness is common with fibromyalgia and is usually felt first thing in the morning. It occurs in the joints, muscles, tendons, and ligaments throughout your body, and most often affects your arms, legs, hands, feet, and back.

One 2012 survey conducted by the Fibromyalgia Network finds up to 90 percent of people with fibromyalgia experience morning stiffness regularly, and this can affect daily activities, make it hard to sit, stand or rest for extended periods. Most sufferers describe morning stiffness as tightness in the joints and muscle pains lasting for a half hour or more, and that may continue into the afternoon and even evening.

Coping With and Managing Morning Stiffness

Some of the main culprits of morning stiffness are lack of physical activity, weight, poor diet, sleep problems, and cold and damp climates. You may be able to relieve morning stiffness by addressing these issues.

- **Make sure you are getting enough sleep, so your body can repair and recharge itself.** If your bedroom is cold, seal the windows and door, or use a space heater or electric blanket to keep cold and dampness from making your body stiff.
- **Do some stretching before getting out of bed.** While you're lying flat on your back, and then while sitting on the side of your bed.
- **Taking a hot shower in the morning can help promote circulation and relax your muscles.** Just simply stand in the water and relax.
- **Once you have warmed up, try some gentle balance exercises and stretches.** Yoga and tai chi are both great exercises for people with fibromyalgia.
- **Drink plenty of water throughout your day, and eat as healthy as you can.** Try to avoid problem foods , such as those containing artificial colors, white flours, and artificial flavors and sweeteners.
- **Get some exercise throughout your day, even if you are just doing lots of walking and stretching.** Every little bit helps!
- **Dress warmly for the winter months.** The cold air will cause your joints and muscles to stiffen up.

Fatigue

Fibromyalgia can bring with it extreme and debilitating fatigue, which makes pain and other symptoms even harder to handle. Moreover, fatigue can significantly affect your ability to work, care for your family and also take care of yourself.

Up to 82 percent of fibromyalgia sufferers report moderate to severe fatigue, this according to a 2016 report in the journal, *Clinical Rheumatology*. This type of fatigue is not typical, can last for long periods and never seems to get better, even with plenty of rest and sleep.

Excessive fatigue affects other symptoms of fibromyalgia, especially pain. Sadly, pain and fatigue are a vicious cycle because pain makes sleeping difficult and lack of sleep worsens pain.

Fatigue also affects the amount of exercise you can do. The more tired you are, the less active you are, and as a result, your pain worsens.

Coping With and Managing Fibromyalgia Fatigue

Fibromyalgia fatigue can make the simplest activities harder to do, but there are ways to manage and deal with it.

One of the best ways to manage this type of fatigue is to pace yourself. Don't do too much when you are feeling low on energy, and don't overdo things when you are having a good day. Pacing yourself will help you do what you need to do and not feel exhausted by the end of your day.

Sometimes, people with fibromyalgia have low levels of vitamin D that contribute to some of their issues with fatigue. In fact, one 2016 review of several studies reported in the journal, *Nutrients,* confirms that vitamin D deficiency is highly prevalent in people with fibromyalgia, and many fibromyalgia sufferers report improved symptoms with vitamin D supplementation.

You should eat a healthy diet and avoid refined, sugary foods and fried and fatty foods, as these slow down your digestive system and cause fatigue. If cooking exhausts you, try already prepared meals or dishes that don't take a lot of time to make.

Fibromyalgia is stressful, and stress can leave you fatigued. Try some simple stress management techniques, such as slow, deep breathing and/or meditation to reduce muscle tension and relax your mind.

Exercise is another way to combat fibromyalgia fatigue and improve your energy. Of course, it is hard to exercise with fibromyalgia, so try low impact activities, such as walking, biking, and swimming.

Fatigue, pain and sleep quality improve when sleep habits improve. Sleep instructions suggested by a 2016 Swedish meta-analysis include:

- Regular sleep routines
- Avoiding caffeine, smoking, alcohol, and TV too close to bedtime
- Regulating your sleep environment – examples include having a comfortable bed, optimal room temperature, and avoiding light and loud noise
- Being active during the day, but not too close to bedtime.

Research studies find that physical activity is the best solution for managing fatigue. It will also make it easier for you to fall asleep at night and stay asleep.

Next page: how to cope with sleep problems related to fibromyalgia, how to manage fibro fog, and more.

Sleep Issues

Sleep disturbances are very common in people who suffer from fibromyalgia. Most people with fibromyalgia have

sleep complaints - the most common is a feeling of non-refreshing or non-restorative sleep.

Non-refreshing or non-restorative sleep is the feeling sleep has not been refreshing, even when a person has slept. And non-refreshing or non-restorative sleep causes mental, physical and cognitive problems.

One 2017 meta-analysis of several studies reported in the *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* finds people with fibromyalgia experience lower sleep quality and efficacy. Moreover, they have long wake times when they awaken in the night, shorter sleep duration, and lighter sleep, compared to others without fibromyalgia.

Insomnia, a sleep disorder characterized by the inability to fall asleep or stay asleep, affects many people with fibromyalgia. And the risk for restless legs syndrome – a condition characterized by the need to move the legs, especially at night - is ten times higher for people with fibromyalgia, this according to a 2010 report in the *Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine*.

The incidence of sleep apnea in people with fibromyalgia is 61%, this according to one report in the journal, *Clinical and Experimental Rheumatology*. Sleep apnea is a very serious sleep disorder where breathing, while sleeping, repeatedly starts and stops.

Coping With and Managing Sleep Issues

Finding a solution to your sleep issues aren't going to cure your fibromyalgia, but getting better quality sleep will reduce pain and fatigue. Moreover, your body needs a good night's sleep to repair damaged tissues, receive essential hormones (i.e., cortisol, which is responsible for maintaining blood pressure and blood sugar), and to help you concentrate and reduce fibrofog during the day.

Some ways you can get better sleep with fibromyalgia include:

- **Antidepressants**. For some people, low doses of tricyclic antidepressants, such as Amitriptyline, can help with achieving a deeper sleep. These types of drugs make you feel tired, so they should be taken close to bedtime.
- **Turning off the electronics**. Watching TV or surfing the internet will boost electrical activity in the brain and make it harder for you to fall asleep.
- **Exercise**. Light exercise can help you sleep better at night.
- **Herbal supplements**. Melatonin can reset your body's natural rhythm and make it easier for you to fall asleep whereas valerian can help with insomnia and ease stress and anxiety. Always check with your doctor before starting any supplement to make none interfere your other medications.
- **Better mattress**. If you are not sleeping on a mattress that promotes a good night's sleep, you should get one. Do your research and find a mattress to help you sleep better.
- **Prescription sleep medications**. There is a variety of FDA approved sleep medications your doctor can prescribe to help you sleep better, including Lunesta and Ambien. These should be considered as a last result, as they come with side effects.

Your doctor can help you find additional solutions to help you sleep better at night to reduce other fibromyalgia symptoms.

Fibro Fog

Fibro fog is the term used to describe the cognitive impairments people with fibromyalgia experience. For many, this probably one of the most stressful symptoms because it affects memory, conversations, and difficulty trying to focus and learn.

Fibro fog symptoms make you feel as if your brain is foggy, and they can occur at any time, with varying intensity. These symptoms are the worst when you are midst fibromyalgia flares.

Fibromyalgia flares are periods where symptoms increase in number and insanity. Flares may happen without

any warning, but most of the time, they are triggered by stress or some other trigger. Flare periods can last anymore from a few days to a few weeks.

Fibro fog affects both men and women with fibromyalgia, but these symptoms tend to affect women more. These episodes of cognitive impairment can last days or weeks.

It is one of the most underappreciated symptoms of fibromyalgia in that doctors don't put enough emphasis on recognition or treatment. If you experience cognitive impairment – especially for long periods - with fibromyalgia, you should bring this to your doctor's attention as this a sign your fibromyalgia may not be well-managed.

Symptoms of fibro fog including:

- Short-term memory loss, which includes forgetfulness
- Difficulty with language, including holding conversations, understanding directions, and expressing thoughts
- Struggling to recall simple numbers and letters, and with transposing them.
- Trouble retaining new information
- Difficulties with focus and concentration

Coping With and Managing Fibro Fog

You can manage and cope with fibromyalgia by:

- **Using a calendar**. You can keep track of appointments, either with a paper calendar or on your computer or smartphone. Set alarms on your computer and phone to remind you to make a call or where you need to be.
- **Having a routine**. Routines help when you are struggling with fibro fog. If you do something the same way each time, it is easier to remember when experiencing cognitive difficulties.
- **Getting organized**. It is hard to concentrate when you have too much junk. Removing clutter from around your workspace and home is a good way to cope with and control fibro fog, and reduce the potential for falls or other accidents.
- **Not multitasking**. It is hard to concentrate you are experiencing fibro fog so do one thing at a time and pace yourself. It is better than trying to do it all at once and failing miserably.
- **Managing stress**. Stress causes fibro fog and worsens it. Do what you can to keep your life stress-free, and learn relaxation exercises, such as meditation and deep breathing, for when things seem overwhelming.

Next page: caring for your mental and emotional health, how to manage anxiety and depression.

Anxiety and Depression

According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, up to 20 percent of people with fibromyalgia suffer from an anxiety disorder or depression.

Anxiety

Researchers are not entirely certain why people with fibromyalgia suffer from anxiety, but they speculate it may have something to do with lower serotonin levels in the brain. Serotonin is a brain neurotransmitter known to affect moods, social behavior, sexual desire, memory, sleep, appetite and so much more.

If you are experiencing anxiety, you may find yourself worrying about general things, such as work, health, money, and family. Many anxiety sufferers describe their anxious feelings as continually being "on edge."

Symptoms of anxiety can also be physical and may include sweating, trembling or twitching, headaches, nausea,

irritability, inability to concentrate and muscle tensions.

Severe anxiety can cause anxiety attacks, also called panic attacks, which include the following symptoms:

- Excessive sweating
- A choking feeling
- Dizziness
- Shortness of breath and/or heart palpitations
- Tingling sensations

Depression

Much like anxiety, depression in most people with fibromyalgia is thought to be the result of low levels of certain brain chemicals, especially serotonin.

Being depressed can keep you from taking care of yourself, adhering to treatment, managing fibromyalgia symptoms with diet and physical activity, and coping effectively. If you experience symptoms of depression, you should bring those to the attention of your attention.

Symptoms of depression in people with fibromyalgia include:

- Low energy
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Feeling hopeless, irritable or guilty
- Having no interest in activities you once enjoyed
- Persistent sad mood
- Uncontrollable crying

In severe cases, depression can lead to suicide attempts.

Coping with and Managing Anxiety and/or Depression

It is important you understand fibromyalgia is more than just muscle and tender point pain. It affects everything about you – your feelings, your response to stress, and even the way you communicate with loved ones and go about your life.

There are various ways you can manage anxiety and depression using both traditional and alternative medicine.

- **Medications can be prescribed to help manage your anxiety and depression symptoms.** Antidepressants are also useful for easing some fibromyalgia symptoms.
- **You should focus on your health by eating right, resting and not overdoing things.** Know your limits and don’t feel guilty when you have to say no.
- **If there are people in your life who bring you undue stress, understand you cannot change those people, but you can minimize the time you spend with them.** You should spend time with positive people who support you and make your life easier and better - either family, friends, or people in a support group.
- **You should also focus on ways to express your feelings rather than bottling them up.** Either talk someone you can trust or write your feelings down in a journal.
- **On a daily basis, find activities to do that you enjoy, as these can make you happy and improve your overall well-being.** And remember, let go of what you cannot control because some things are just simply out of your control.
- **Relaxation techniques are also great ways to manage stress.** Try meditation, deep breathing, mindfulness, listening to soothing music, yoga or tai chi.
- **Some natural supplements are designed to promote relaxation and calmness.** These include chamomile, B6 vitamins, magnesium, lavender, and St. John’s Wort. When considering supplements, it is

important to talk to your doctor before taking anything in addition to your prescription medications. Supplements have some side effects and could adversely interact with prescription medications.

The Bottom Line

Fibromyalgia is a lifelong condition that causes pain, fatigue and a long list of other symptoms. While it is not curable, there are many options for treatments and coping.

Talk to your doctor your treatment options. From medication to physical therapy, there are plenty of alternatives when some treatments don't work.

You can still have a productive and healthy life despite fibromyalgia by being proactive in coping with and managing symptoms.