Is it Normal to Have Leg Pain With Fibromyalgia?

by STARLA RICH

Fibromyalgia Leg Pain: How Common Is It?

I am what some might call “vertically challenged.” I measure at 5 feet 1½ inches. No rounding off for me because every inch counts! Because of my height (or lack off) in my teens, I learned to walk fast. I had to, to keep up with other kids.

We walked to school, at times, before I got my driver’s license. Even when we rode the bus, the bus stop was several blocks down from my house in the neighborhood. It didn’t take long for me to learn to take two steps to one of the others.

My legs have always been strong, so when I found myself in chronic pain in my legs after becoming ill, it was debilitating.

Types and Causes of Leg Pain

When diagnosing fibromyalgia, there are specific areas of the body that are examined called “tender points.” If a patient exhibits pain in many of these areas, it is suggested that they are suffering from fibromyalgia.

The truth about tender points is that they are actually tender “areas” rather than points because the pain within and around a muscle radiates to the surrounding tendons, or what is called “trigger points.” The interesting thing about fibromyalgia related leg pain is that it doesn't matter whether you are standing, sitting, or lying down.

The propensity for pain in the lower quadrant of the fibro body is greater due to those trigger points are woven within the layers of muscle and extremely tender areas that are not directly related to any activity or exercise.

- **One of my areas of pain is in my knees.** The pain isn’t confined to just the knee, however. Tender points on the inside of the knee can extend on average from 2-4 inches above and below the inside of the knee. This is important because it helps in determining treatment and therapy. This area for me is worsened because I also have osteoarthritis in both my knees.
- **Speaking of the knees, the longest and most widely used muscle in the leg (otherwise known as the Sartorius muscle in the quadriceps area), is responsible for much of our mobility in the lower quadrant of the fibro body.** When this muscle and the surrounding muscles become de-conditioned, (due to lack of exercise and activity because of ongoing pain and fatigue), everything around this area also weakens including tendons and ligaments. Agility can be lost, and these "areas" of interest become wider still with the tender point pain spreading both above and below the actual point location on the inside of the knee.
- **Certain ADL’s (Activities of Daily Living) can exacerbate these tender AREAS.** Examples are sitting for extended periods, standing in one place, displacement OR shifting of weight while standing, driving, travel, cleaning activities, etc.
- **The tender points within the buttock area can also radiate pain down the leg, often on the sides**

and back of legs. Hip and leg pain can result because the Iliotibial band (outside of legs) runs from the hip area down the side of each leg and when this area is tight can cause stabbing pain and severe stiffness.

- **Weakness and/or shortening in the hip abductors can also cause extreme tightness and decrease mobility.** Iliotibial Band Syndrome (ITBS) can occur in athletes through repetition and overuse, but this painful condition is not uncommon for people with fibromyalgia.
- **Since we understand that fibromyalgia manifests itself with hypersensitivity in the nerves in the body (feeling pain close to the surface), many fibro patients also deal with pain in their feet, and as a result of that pain, in their ankles also.** It is quite common for those with FMS to develop peripheral neuropathy because of the malfunction of the neurological system and also because of mal-absorption of essential vitamins such as B-12 which is necessary for the proper function of the neurological system.

Fibromyalgia Leg Pain Relief and Treatment

One thing to consider with fibromyalgia and leg pain is that any position we stay in too long, like sitting or standing can increase pain and activate trigger points.

The tender points will always be there on some level, but it is the trigger points that become activated from repetitive movements or being in one position too long. It is important not to sit for long first thing in the morning. When we go from lying in bed to sitting first thing in the morning, this only creates more stiffness in the lower back, hips, legs, and knees.

I understand the struggle with movement first thing, especially if it has been a fitful painful night. For me, it is even more of a battle because of the neuropathy in my feet, which makes it quite painful to walk and put pressure on my feet first thing. Pushing through the pain, however, and moving just a bit will help with the stiffness and ultimately ease the pain.

Speaking of nighttime leg pain, I have found that putting pillows between my knees and ankles helps as well as wearing socks if my feet are cold because cold tends to exasperate the pain.

Aside from these daily changes in habit, there are certain structured exercises, treatments and activities that can improve muscle quality and combat the daily leg pain and overall body pain that fibromyalgia causes:

Consistent Conditioning

It isn’t about “to exercise or not to exercise.” We must keep moving even if it isn’t at an accelerated workout level that we were once able to do. Conditioning is more than about temporary pain relief. It is about creating long-term pain relief and subsequent independence as we age with a chronic illness.

Seek out “fibro-friendly” exercises” that will condition and strengthen your body, for example:

- Simple walking
- Stretching exercises with exercise bands
- Riding a stationary bike

It is important to know that it’s the everyday activities that can be detrimental to a fibro body and not the conditioning through safe and effective exercise.

There are some activities of daily living such as cleaning a bathtub or lifting heavy objects improperly that really can be detrimental to a fibro body, whereas focused fitness training actually 'protects' the body and builds a stronger resilience and foundation.

Myofascial Treatment

Those with fibromyalgia develop “knots” in their muscles and tendons even more than a healthy individual. It can

be helpful to experiment with light "rolling" on a foam roller OR working with a therapist who is experienced in myofascial release.

It does not always have to be extremely painful to ‘work’ these areas, but there is a benefit in learning how to work with these affected points/areas in a way that is healing, not detrimental to the fibro body.

Tender Points Treatment

Another helpful treatment is using compression wear on the legs and knees whenever needed, even before and after exercise. This can increase circulation, soothe "tender" tendons and ease the pain in the affected areas.

Temporary Relief

Things such as Epsom salt baths, natural food or herbal anti-inflammatories, and light massage can all be helpful temporarily to ease leg pain. The salt baths, in particular, have been beneficial for me in that the magnesium draws out the pain and stiffness.

Whatever method you choose to combat the pain, stiffness, and lack of mobility from fibromyalgia leg pain, be consistent, be kind to yourself and don’t give up!