Can Resistance Training Help Fibromyalgia Symptoms?

by ADRIEL MALDONADO

Resistance Training for Fibromyalgia

I already know what you are thinking, “Not another article telling me to exercise!” Believe me, I get it, that was me too not all that long ago.

I would go to the doctor, and they would tell me to exercise to help my fibromyalgia symptoms, and I would nod along as they spoke, but in my head, I was thinking. “Okay, but *how*?”

I would start and stop exercise regimes because at some point they would cause too much pain or just were not practical for me to do on a regular basis. The facts though were continually put in front of me; exercise will, in the long run, lessen fibromyalgia pain.

I did eventually find that I liked doing stretching and low impact exercises and they have been beneficial to me. But then I began to hear of success stories of those with fibro being able to do much more strenuous exercise.

Researching resistance training and fibromyalgia was eye-opening, the evidence was too overwhelming that I decided I had to give it a try. But first, what is resistance training? Why is it beneficial for people with fibromyalgia? And what is a safe way to start?

What Is Resistance Training?

Resistance training is any type of exercise that causes your muscles to contract against some external resistance. This can be done in various ways, generally by lifting weights.

Why Is Resistance Training Beneficial?

One study compared women with fibromyalgia who worked with a personal trainer doing resistance training, to women with fibromyalgia who did not do resistance training. This study took place over a 16 to 21-week period, with the women exercising 2 to 3 times a week.

The results were that the group that did resistance training reported an increase in overall well-being, their ability to do normal daily activities increased, their pain and tenderness decreased, and their muscle strength increased.

The conclusion is that regular sessions of resistance training over 16 to 21 weeks, will yield beneficial results for most fibromyalgia patients.

How to Get Started

For someone with fibromyalgia or chronic pain, the key is to start slow. If you do too much at once, you will be more likely to trigger a fibro flare-up, making it less likely that you will continue. It is also best to talk to your doctor

first to make sure what you are planning is safe for you.

UF Health set some important guidelines for exercising with fibromyalgia:

- Avoid intense or forceful muscle effort while exercising.
- Do one set of 8 to 12 repetitions, which is sufficient for strength improvement.
- Increase the number of sets as your fitness level improves.
- Do exercises that involve the major muscles of the body.
- When possible, use multi-joint exercises rather than single joint movements.
- Make sure movements are smooth and fluid.
- Perform exercises through a full range of motion.
- Discontinue exercise if muscles become sore or exhausted.
- Make sure you get adequate rest between exercises.

There are a number of tools that can be used for resistance training, some of which you probably already have in your home:

- Resistance bands
- Weights
- Water bottles
- Canned goods

When choosing what exercises you want to do, you must factor in what will be practical for your life. Do you prefer to have instruction and someone else to hold you accountable? Then you may benefit from getting help from a personal trainer at a local gym.

Do you feel more comfortable working out in the privacy of your home? Or do you have a hectic schedule that makes going to a gym to work out difficult? Then you might prefer working out at home, using items you already have around the house.

One integral consideration when starting resistance training is, will you be able to add this to your schedule on a regular basis? To gain the full benefits of exercise it needs to be done at least two to three times a week.

When I first started resistance training, I knew I had to start very slowly and then work my way up. I pulled out two cans from the pantry and started on day one with just five reps. On day three, I added five more reps. And on day five, I added five more than that. On day seven I added five reps of a different motion. Once I started feeling the effects of these exercises I rested for the day. Since then I have added more exercises, with occasional rest days in between.

Taking time to rest is also important, it gives your body and muscles time to recover, which increases strength and durability.

A Success Story from a Fellow Fibro Warrior

Considering I have just started my path of resistance training, I decided to pick the brain of someone that has been doing it for a while. Here’s what Amanda Vinci, from Everything Hurts, had to say about her experience with resistance training:

“Fitness is not for people with fibro” — that’s what I thought since I began suffering from fibromyalgia at 15 years old.

"I’ve always excused myself from lifting anything heavy, running, or most sports. I was especially afraid of personal training. In my mind, that was something for strong, healthy people; not a girl who struggles to climb the subway steps.

"After a year of being frustrated with my lack of success at the gym, I finally worked up the courage to talk to a trainer about my goals. With my condition in mind, we started a training program that would strengthen me to excel at my everyday tasks, reduce my pain and stiffness, and help me to tone up and slim down.

"I've been seeing my trainer Rob Corapi twice a week for a year now, and the results are real. I'm physically a different person, and the changes are dramatic on the inside and starting to break through to the outside. He has 3-4 different routines prepped for me, and we carry them out depending on how I'm feeling and what's hurting. I've never felt more strong and determined in my life.

"I was always the kid who got winded running alongside the soccer ball at six years old, and I could never imagine myself boxing, deadlifting and throwing a medicine ball. Now here I am, beating my 15-year-old sister at reps of squats. And even though I'm still far from where I want to be, I'm a long way from where I've started."

In Conclusion

I know it can seem like exercising with fibromyalgia is impossible! But, it is possible, and it will help, as long as you remember to follow these basic guidelines:

1. Start slow.
2. Take time to rest.
3. Be consistent.