What is Costochondritis and How is It Related to Fibromyalgia?

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Costochondritis and Fibromyalgia

Fibromyalgia causes a wide range of symptoms and doctors aren't sure what causes it. Some think it's a problem with how a person’s nervous system (brain and spinal cord) process pain signals from your nerves.

Often, costochondritis and fibromyalgia can be related. In this article, we’ll look at the link between the two and how costochondritis can be managed.

What is Costochondritis?

This is a condition that causes certain areas of the chest to be painful to touch; pain centers around the breastbone and ribs.

It is also known as non-cardiac chest pain or musculoskeletal chest pain, as it does not involve the heart.

It is caused by inflammation of the cartilage connecting the ribs and breastbone, called the sternum. The cartilage allows the ribs to expand and open when taking a deep breath.

What Are the Symptoms of Costochondritis?

I have had two severe attacks of this pain since developing fibromyalgia. One lasted nearly three hours and it was debilitating. I could not take deep breaths and the pain was unbearable. My chest is often painful to touch, around the ribs and breastbone.

I was frightened and could not get an ambulance for over an hour due to other emergency calls. I found some helpful home treatments, which I will share with you.

The pain feels like a stabbing, aching, or burning sensation, it can range from mild to excruciating, and can be frightening. Your chest can feel tight, and can feel like you are struggling to take deep or normal breaths. Sneezing and coughing can also cause an increase in pain.

Sometimes you may feel pain that radiates into the shoulders and arms as well. You may feel swelling, or notice redness in the painful area.

Is It Costochondritis or Something More Serious?

Unexplained chest pain should never be ignored. But, there are other symptoms that accompany chest pain that you need to get checked out immediately.

Heart Attack

If any of these other symptoms accompany the pain, it could possibly be a heart attack:

- Nausea
- Pain between the shoulder blades (one of the most common symptoms of heart attack in women)
- Pain radiating down one arm
- Neck, jaw, or head pain
- Sweating
- Sudden onset of pain that does not diminish, and is not caused by exertion

Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD)

This usually develops after eating food. Symptoms of chest pain are often worse at night and it feels like a burning sensation, you may feel like you have a lump in your throat or have difficulty swallowing.

Collapsed Lung

This condition usually comes from a trauma and is usually followed with an increase in heart rate, sudden tiredness, and shortness of breath.

The Connection Between Fibromyalgia and Costochondritis

Fibromyalgia causes pain in tender points throughout the body; one of these can fall beneath the collarbone.

According to verywellhealth.com, a study showed that non-specific chest pain, is listed as the most common additional symptom in people who were hospitalized with fibromyalgia.

What Causes Costochondritis to Flare-up?

After researching both conditions, there seem to be some similarities between the flare-ups of both conditions:

- Physical exertion
- Temperature fluctuations
- Poor diet
- Hormonal fluctuations
- Poor sleep
- Stress

How Is It Diagnosed?

Your medical professional will undertake an examination, pressing on the area that connects your ribs and breastbone, checking for soreness and tenderness.

Other tests will be performed to rule out other conditions, before making a diagnosis of costochondritis.

Treatment for Costochondritis

Medications

There are medical options available: over the counter medication, anti-inflammatory drugs, such as Aleve (naproxen) and Advil or Motrin (ibuprofen). Please be careful with these types of drugs. I have had several stomach bleeds due to extended use, and no longer use them.

Prescription medications:

- Prescription-strength NSAIDs
- Other painkillers, such as narcotics
- Anti-anxiety medications
- Tricyclic antidepressants, including amitriptyline
- Oral steroids or injection of a steroid into the area involved

Therapies

Examples include:

- Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT).
- Physiotherapy, massage, and possibly chiropractic care. Be aware that if you have spinal conditions, I would strongly recommend you speak to your doctor first.
- Psychotherapy may be useful too, as this can help address the emotional toll of chronic pain, and can help you focus on reducing pain, as this is controlled within the brain and through the nervous system.

Home Remedies

There are home remedies you can try to reduce your symptoms:

- **Heat pad and/or ice pack:** Used at the same time, this really helped me. I used ice on the chest and a heat pad on my back. Heat loosens tight muscles, and cold helps ease inflammation.
- **Relaxation techniques:** Yoga, tai chi, and mindfulness meditation can all be helpful. All these practices are proven to reduce stress. Maybe even consider lightly massaging your chest area too.

What Can Be Done to Prevent It?

I am sure you have heard of the saying "prevention is better than cure". I absolutely believe this, especially when it comes to costochondritis and fibromyalgia.

I believe the same as what research has shown, that there are some similar triggers to causing a flare up in both:

- **Pacing activities/exercise:** Take care not to overdo it, as over exertion is a common cause of this pain, especially with weights focusing on the chest area, such as chest/bench press. Spread out activities, with plenty of rest. Your doctor may recommend some stretching across that area.
- **Change of diet:** Certain foods/drinks can flare up fibromyalgia. Research details that the same may be applicable to costochondritis. Avoid processed foods, sugar, too much caffeine, and alcohol. Increase the use of lean protein, wholegrains, and eat plenty of vegetables, especially greens.
- **Improve sleep:** Lack of sleep can increase pain and stress. Keep your bedroom cool, dark and quiet, and enforce a set bedtime and wake up time. Keep the room uncluttered to reduce stress. Do not use any item that uses blue screen technology at nighttime to ensure natural melatonin isn’t affected.
- **Change your job:** Especially if you undertake a manual role.
- **Reduce stress:** Stress has an awful impact of both our mental and physical health and can affect sleep and increase flare-ups. This can cause an increase in pain and other symptoms of fibromyalgia, and possibly costochondritis.

Treatment and prevention can reduce flare-ups of costochondritis and fibromyalgia, but there is no cure for either.