A Fibromyalgia Self-Assessment: How to Identify Your Symptoms

by AFRA WILLMORE

Do I Have Fibromyalgia?

Fibromyalgia comes with a frustrating collection of symptoms that can vary from person to person, so getting a diagnosis can be tricky. Have you ever wondered, “Do I have fibromyalgia?” We’re going to take a deeper look to help you answer this question and find the care you need.

So many of the symptoms taken in isolation can be attributed to other conditions including arthritis, multiple sclerosis, lupus, and Lyme disease, and you may have to go through a gamut of tests to rule out other conditions before finally receiving a diagnosis.

What Are the Symptoms of Fibromyalgia?

The common symptoms that present are:

- Chronic fatigue
- Fatigue
- Widespread pain
- Forgetfulness and confusion often described as “brain fog” or “fibro fog”
- Headaches
- Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)
- Extreme sensitivity to touch
- Stiffness
- Sleep issues
- Anxiety
- Depression

Those with fibromyalgia sometimes report other symptoms including heat regulation issues, tingling skin sensations or pins and needles, dizziness, and clumsiness. When I am in a flare-up my skin often feels like red hot ants are walking across it.

However, because everyone’s experience of fibromyalgia is different and many of these symptoms can be attributable to other health conditions, it can be difficult to pin down what is caused by the condition and what is co-incidental.

Can I Self-Assess?

Not only can you self-assess but it is actually a really smart thing to do so you can go to the doctor armed with evidence to help them reach a diagnosis.

The best way to go about this is to keep a diary of symptoms, noting the time of day and the circumstances

preceding any symptoms. A pattern may emerge, showing you that getting cold after your weekly swim triggers pain and stiffness, or that sitting for long periods on chairs at home, the office, or in a vehicle leaves you unable to move easily. I found that my terrible habit of playing games on my mobile phone while on the toilet left me unable to stand up unaided!

You may find (as I did) that hormone changes around your period can affect your cognitive ability, increase pain across your body, and impact your energy levels above and beyond what you have become used to with premenstrual tension.

However, do not assume that all your symptoms are caused by fibromyalgia. Keep an open mind, listen to your doctor's opinion, and allow them to run any tests they may want to do to rule out potentially serious conditions. You might be right in the end but there is a process most doctors need to follow to cover all possibilities.

Fibromyalgia Risk Factors

Gender

Women are significantly more likely to develop fibromyalgia than men. One study states that the split is 9:1 and that women report more symptoms including common and morning fatigue, pain and bowel issues, and more tender points. The author concludes that, "The mechanisms of gender differences in these illnesses are not fully understood, but are likely to involve an interaction between biology, psychology, and sociocultural factors."

Family History

Having a family history of fibromyalgia also makes people more likely to develop it. This can be tricky to establish though as the name "fibromyalgia" is relatively new, being coined in 1976. Previously it was called fibrositis but may also have been misdiagnosed as lumbago or arthritis or simply old age, especially if sufferers were self-diagnosed.

Physical or Emotional Stress

Many doctors believe that fibromyalgia can be triggered by a physically or emotionally traumatic event such as a car accident, emergency surgery, infection, or extreme stress.

My Experience

Symptoms can appear very suddenly or slowly over a period of time. With my own experience, my symptoms manifested quite suddenly following the emergency caesarean birth of my sixth child.

Initially I assumed my pain, fatigue and confusion was caused by recovering from surgery added to the tiredness of looking after a new-born along with five other children. It took almost a year and repeated visits to the doctor to be diagnosed with the 18-point tender points test. It was eventually carried out by a consultant rheumatism specialist. This test is considered less reliable nowadays, but some practitioners still use it.

How Do I Go About Getting a Diagnosis?

As I mentioned previously, keep a diary for at least two months noting symptoms and potential triggers. Be very specific about where any pain is felt and rate it out of 10, with 10 being the most intense pain you can bear. Make a note of any symptoms even if you do not actually attribute them to leading to a potential fibromyalgia diagnosis.

Next, book an appointment with your normal physician who may wish to refer you to a specialist. Be prepared for blood tests and a thorough physical exam.

There is a U.S. company offering FDA approved blood tests to diagnose fibromyalgia, which is open to people seeking a diagnosis across the globe. This may be covered by your U.S. medical insurance.

Should I Seek a Diagnosis?

While it can be psychologically useful to get a diagnosis, be warned that fibromyalgia has no real treatment options or cure. A diagnosis letter from a doctor might be helpful if you need adjustments made to your working life or to prove to doubting friends and family that you are not faking your symptoms.

Even with a diagnosis, you may come across people who doubt the condition exists, including some medical professionals. However, a diagnosis will give you the opportunity to learn about and discover coping mechanisms for this condition allowing you to live your best life even with fibromyalgia.