

Fibromyalgia Syndrome



What is Fibromyalgia Syndrome?

Fibromyalgia (fi-bro-my-AL-ja) Syndrome (FMS) is characterized by multiple physical and psychological symptoms. These symptoms include widespread pain in the muscles or where muscles attach to bones, muscle stiffness, fatigue, sleep disturbance, mood disruption (particularly depression) and impairment in daily activities.

FMS is not life-threatening and rarely worsens over time if treated properly. Most people with FMS report feeling some pain all the time, although the pain intensity can vary with the time of day, weather changes, physical activity, and the presence of stressful situations. The pain symptoms that most people report are similar to the discomfort noticed with arthritis. However, in FMS, the joints are not deformed, nor do they deteriorate. Disturbances in mood and concentration are common. Usually, 25-30% of people with FMS experience depression. The good news is that, with proper treatment and self-management, these symptoms can improve.

What causes Fibromyalgia Syndrome?

The exact cause of FMS is not known. It is believed that many factors may trigger the symptoms of FMS. Current thinking is that an

illness, physical trauma, emotional trauma, or hormonal changes may trigger the development of FMS. These factors can result in a vicious cycle of suffering, inactivity, and disability.

Who gets Fibromyalgia Syndrome?

It is estimated that FMS affects 2% of the adults in the United States. It is more common in women than in men. It usually occurs between the ages of 20-60 years and most commonly affects people in their mid-30s.

How is Fibromyalgia Syndrome diagnosed?

There is no specific laboratory test to accurately identify FMS. FMS is diagnosed by the presence of multiple sore spots or *tender points* in specific areas along with other symptoms. These *tender points* are at the knees, base of the spine, shoulders, elbows, and front and back of the neck. Additional symptoms of FMS include interrupted sleep, mood disturbance, muscle stiffness, and fatigue.

How is Fibromyalgia Syndrome treated?

Studies have shown that, with proper treatment, most people with FMS improve and are able to deal with their symptoms. Some people with FMS have mild symptoms and need



very little treatment, while others have such severe symptoms that they are unable to function socially or at work. A program that employs physicians, psychologists, and physical therapists may be useful for people experiencing severe symptoms.

Treatment of fibromyalgia syndrome generally includes:

- An exercise program to improve physical functioning
- Cognitive-behavioral strategies to improve mood and functioning
- Medications to improve sleep and mood.

Physical Activity

The main principle of treating FMS is to improve physical functioning by stretching and moving tight, sore muscles. Some people may be reluctant to exercise, particularly if they are already in pain and feel tired. Low-impact aerobic exercises—such as brisk walking, biking, swimming, or water aerobics—are generally the best way to start such a program.

Exercising on a regular basis, such as every other day, and gradually increasing to reach a better level of fitness can be helpful in dealing with symptoms of FMS. It is important to gently stretch muscles and move joints through an adequate range of motion daily and before and after aerobic exercise. Physical therapists may be consulted to design a specific exercise program to improve posture, flexibility, and fitness.

Cognitive-Behavioral Strategies

When people increase their ability to cope with the symptoms of FMS, they are more likely to experience physical and psychological improvement. Cognitive-behavioral strategies have been shown to help people better manage their symptoms and improve their ability to deal with FMS. The cognitive-behavioral approach highlights how thoughts, ideas, and beliefs affect a person's behavior and emotions. In cognitive-behavioral therapy, people learn ways to change their thinking styles to decrease suffering. Contact your doctor, nurse practitioner, behavioral medicine specialist, or psychiatry department for more information.

Medications

Medications that promote deeper sleep and also relax muscles may help people with FMS. These include amitriptyline (Elavil®) and cyclobenzaprine (Flexeril®). The anti-inflammatory medications, such as aspirin and ibuprofen, generally do not have a major effect on FMS. Similarly, narcotic pain relievers and tranquilizers do not seem to help. Corticosteroids, both injections and oral preparations, have not been shown to have long-term benefits and can have harmful side effects.

Coping with Fibromyalgia Syndrome.

Most people with FMS may have had many tests and seen many health care providers in hopes of finding an answer. This can lead to increased frustration and fear, that may increase symptoms. Sometimes family and friends, as well as physicians, may express doubts about FMS. To a person experiencing frustrating symptoms, disbelief from others can increase feelings of isolation, depression, guilt, and anger. Treatment is available to help you manage FMS. You can feel better!

Call Kaiser Permanente if . . .

- you begin to increase your use of pain medication.
- your activity level begins to decline.
- you have an increase in feelings of anxiety.
- you have an increase in feelings of depression.

Other resources

- Connect to our Web site at members.kp.org.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Request a *Healthphone Directory* from Health Education and call the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone at 1-800-332-7563; TTY, 1-800-777-9059.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for more health information, programs, and other resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse any brand names; any similar products may be used.