

FMSupport

Fibromyalgia Support Group - South Essex
working with Fibromyalgia Association UK - reg'd charity 1042585



**There are no two fibromites the same -
we are all individual, but we do share some...**

COMMON SYMPTOMS

This symptoms guide, prepared by fibromyalgia sufferers, is no substitute for proper medical investigation and formal diagnosis. If you believe you may have fibromyalgia, speak to your GP who may refer you to a rheumatologist or other specialist/consultant.

CHRONIC GENERALISED PAIN

Fibromyalgia is classified as a syndrome. **The chief complaint of fibromyalgia is pain. The pain can cause functional limitations varying from mild to incapacitating. This pain is in the muscles, tendons, ligaments, bursa and sometimes feels as if it is in the joints.** This is mostly related to pain at the muscle and tendon insertions into the joint area and is not a reflection of actual joint pathology or inflammation. **The pain may be described as a constant ache or throbbing.**

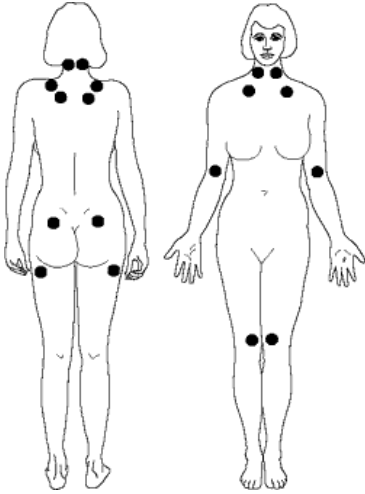
Typical pain locations include the head, neck, shoulders (especially between shoulder blades), low back, and hip muscles. Chest pain can be a problem especially for large busted women. Certain areas may cause sharp, stabbing pain, and these areas are sensitive to touch. The body's process of monitoring pain, recording pain, and expressing pain is an energy consuming process that involves nerves, neurotransmitters and other various enzymes and hormones.

Most of the time, there is no clear reason why the pain occurs; that is, there has been no specific illness or trauma. In one third or more of fibromyalgia cases, some type of event, either an injury like whiplash or sometimes a viral illness such as a flu like illness, precipitated the fibromyalgia condition. **Usually the pain begins in one location, such as the shoulder, but over time, it begins to involve more and more other areas until it is no longer localised, but rather generalised throughout the body.**

Pain may wander to different sites; the low back may be sore one day, and then the next day the neck hurts. These wandering symptoms may lead you to think you are losing your mind. **Fibromyalgia, indeed, causes wandering pain.**

A person in constant pain will use up more energy and have less stored energy than a person without constant pain. Studies have shown that muscles with fibromyalgia do not use oxygen as well as normal muscles. Lack of oxygen usually sends a signal of pain.

MULTIPLE TENDER POINTS



The tender points are important in diagnosing fibromyalgia, though will rarely be noticed until pressure – even gentle pressure – is applied to them.

For fibromyalgia to be diagnosed there will usually have been widespread pain – both above and below the waist, and on both sides of the body – for at least three months, and **pain in at least 11 of the 18 tender points when they are pressed.**

Other conditions should be ruled out by other tests, including but not limited to blood tests.

MORNING STIFFNESS

Most people with fibromyalgia report morning stiffness, usually lasting a few hours. They feel somewhat looser and better during the late morning to early evening, and then have more pain again in the evening. Most would say the worst time of the day is in the morning. Instead of waking up refreshed and pain-free, we wake up tired, stiff and sore! Once we get going, our muscles loosen up within a few hours, and we are fairly mobile, until later in the day. **The morning stiffness may be particularly bad the day after doing strenuous or unusual activities, or the weather changes to a cold damp morning.**

COLD INTOLERANCE

People with fibromyalgia are very sensitive to weather changes especially cold, damp conditions and cold draughts. One major enemy is cold air conditioner draughts, which can exacerbate neck and shoulder pain. Even if we are completely relaxed and enjoying ourselves, a cold draughts on exposed skin overlying tender muscle areas can cause an automatic reflexive reaction, sending a signal to the muscles and causing muscle pain.

In people with fibromyalgia, the skin is very sensitive especially to cold air. Likewise, cold water is a difficulty, problems arise in pools where the water temperature is lower than skin temperature. Swimming pool water temperatures should be at least 85°F.

FATIGUE/POOR SLEEP

Fatigue is a major complaint with those who have fibromyalgia. Poor sleep certainly contributes to this problem, but persons with fibromyalgia will often indicate they have no energy whatsoever, cannot get motivated to do various projects, and would rather lie down and go to sleep.

Poor sleep is a hallmark in nearly everyone with fibromyalgia. Many people report that the quality of their sleep is poor even though they may sleep for eight hours, and when they awaken in the morning, they do not feel well rested. Sleep may be characterised by frequent awakening especially in the early morning hours and lack of deep, sound sleep. This disturbed and non-restorative sleep pattern is typical of people with fibromyalgia.

Sleep studies using monitors measuring brain waves of sleeping individuals **have found that there is an abnormality in the deep sleep stage. This lack of deep sleep accounts for the feeling that our sleep is non-restorative, or that our battery did not "get recharged" during the night.**

Some studies have shown that when a non-sufferer's sleep was interrupted during the "deep sleep" cycle, tender points and pain would develop with fatigue.

SWELLING

Weather changes can also cause fibromyalgia symptoms to increase, especially if it is cold or damp. It appears that muscles act like weather barometers. When it is cold and damp, perhaps our muscles absorb more moisture or are more swollen or sensitive which may cause the increased pain. Whatever the reason, **the majority of people with fibromyalgia do better in warm, dry regions or during warmer, drier seasons. There are of course those who cannot tolerate heat and prefer cooler conditions.**

A woman with fibromyalgia may notice increased swelling before her menstrual cycle. Fibromyalgia symptoms often flare-up just before menstruation. This may be related to increased muscle swelling during the fluid-retention state of their menstrual cycle. **In fact, the common pre-menstrual syndrome (PMS) is often more severe in women with fibromyalgia.**

WEAKNESS & SPASMS

Fibromyalgia causes the muscles to be tight, stringy, and to have inconsistent localised spasms. Fibromyalgia muscles do not use oxygen well and have decreased energy compounds, fatigue is a major problem. The muscles, therefore, are painful, tight, and easily fatigued. When we attempt to exercise, muscles often respond by increasing pain.

Negative painful experiences may lead to decreased motivation and decreased activity, or exercise phobias. A cycle of increased muscle tightness, spasms, and increased pain starts over again, which can lead you to sink deeper and deeper into a painful condition state. The person in constant pain will use up more energy and have less stored energy than a person without constant pain. This causes fatigue. The body usually signals pain when there is a lack of oxygen, and, as mentioned, fibromyalgia muscles do not use oxygen well. Also, muscles have less access to oxygen because they are always contracted and therefore have limited blood supply.

Some weakness can be contributed to the muscles being so tight. **One of the most important things for a person with fibromyalgia to do is to stretch.** Since fibromyalgia muscles are so tight, they are more vulnerable to strains, so it is especially important to counteract this tightness mechanism by stretching. **BUT it is important to remember to warm up the muscles before you begin your stretching routine. Taking a warm bath, standing under a hot shower or by gently marching on the spot, can do this.**

Stretching increases the muscle flexibility which in turn leads to decreased pain and decreased vulnerability to injuries or strains. Passive stretching exercises can involve different body parts; head, neck, trunk, upper body, low back, hips, and legs. Most people with fibromyalgia can learn self-passive stretching exercises to help the feeling of weakness, pain, and stiffness and swelling in their muscles.

The muscles, especially the arms, can feel weak when doing isometric type activities. For example, when holding the arms up to change a light bulb, the energy will feel like it is being drained from the arms and this will cause a sensation of weakness. This is due to the sustained contractions and the increased demand for oxygen that is needed by isometric activity.

Muscle twitching and spasms are not usually as noticeable to others as it feels to us, but unfortunately can contribute to sleep problems if it is particularly bad.

NUMBNESS

There may be tingling, numbness, or feelings of heat or cold with **fibromyalgia**. These abnormal sensations are called paresthesia and may radiate or travel to different locations. **For example, painful muscle areas in the upper back may cause arms to become painful and tingling even though no problem in the arm is present. The skin is also described as extremely sensitive and painful in many people with fibromyalgia.**

COGNITIVE DYSFUNCTION ('Fibro-Fog')

Many people with fibromyalgia experience episodes of unclear thinking or cognitive dysfunction. They become forgetful, lose their train of thought, forget words or mix them up. This is what is popularly called “brain fog” or “fibro fog.”

Fibro-fog is possibly one of the most common yet unrecognised symptoms of fibromyalgia, and can include:

- short term memory loss
- difficulty remembering where you put things
- difficulty remembering plans
- difficulty with language, including trouble holding conversations, understanding conversations, and expressing thoughts
- difficulty finding the right word to use in conversation
- trouble remembering simple numbers
- transposing letters and numbers
- trouble concentrating and focusing
- trouble retaining new information

Fibro-fog tends to have negative effects on fibromyalgia symptoms and the course of the illness, causing people with fibromyalgia to forget important self-care techniques including stretching and exercise, or taking medication. **It can be one of the most frustrating symptoms of fibromyalgia, and is often coupled with depression.**

Like so many of the symptoms of fibromyalgia the exact cause of fibro-fog is itself unclear. Lack of refreshing sleep almost certainly has a bearing, though it is also possible that a decreased blood-flow to certain areas of the brain contributes to the problem, or that the brain is so busy processing the myriad of pain signals that it cannot form new memories properly. Many people find that keeping their brain active helps to combat the problems and embarrassment of fibro-fog. For example, doing a crossword or sudoku puzzle,

JOINT PAIN

Joint pain and stiffness are usually found in those with fibromyalgia. **This is mostly related to pain at the muscle and tendon insertions into the joint area and is not a reflection of actual joint pathology or inflammation.**

HEADACHES

Fibromyalgia sufferers often experience headaches - there are many different triggers for them, often other conditions related or possibly related to fibromyalgia, including:

- **Tension/migraine headaches** (most people with fibromyalgia have these). Tension headaches are also called muscle contraction headaches. They usually begin at the base of the neck and extend upward to the temples forming a band-like squeezing headache. Migraine headaches are vascular in origin. Some event triggers blood vessels to the brain to constrict and then dilate leading to severe headaches. Nausea, vomiting, eye pain, and other symptoms may also be associated with headaches.
- **Temporomandibular joint or TMJ dysfunction.** This causes jaw pain, dizziness, and "head" pain, a common associated condition of fibromyalgia.
- **Post-concussive syndrome** (residual headaches, neck pain, and/or difficulty concentrating after a concussion, often part of post-traumatic fibromyalgia and severe whiplash injury).
- **Allergy flare-up with congestion or cold symptoms** (in the USA some of the medical professionals believe that allergies are more common in people with fibromyalgia, this is not the case with the UK medical professionals, they believe that there is insufficient evidence to substantiate this claim).
- **Referred pain** from tender/trigger points in neck and shoulder areas.
- **Side effects from medications** used to treat fibromyalgia (for example; tricyclic antidepressants, beta-blockers, migraine headache medications, and muscle relaxers).
- **Hormonal changes in women** (women with fibromyalgia commonly experience headaches as part of the pre-menstrual syndrome (PMS) or menopause).
- **Dry eye syndrome** (common in fibromyalgia; may cause eye irritation and headaches).
- **Eye strain** (fibromyalgia pain and fatigue in eye muscles cause headaches).

This isn't an exhaustive list of symptoms, but these are the most common. Other symptoms can include:

- irritable bowel/bladder
- depression/anxiety
- hypermobility (especially in younger people)
- rhinitis, other allergies and possibly sinus infection
- panic attacks
- tinnitus (ringing in ears)
- low-frequency hearing loss
- weight change (gain)
- night sweats
- heart palpitations

If you believe you may have fibromyalgia, speak to your GP who may refer you to a rheumatologist or other specialist/consultant.



Working with the Fibromyalgia Association UK (registered charity 1042582), FMSupport offer support and information to anyone affected by Fibromyalgia, holding regular meetings and facilitating peer support throughout South Essex, and supporting other local network groups across the East Anglia region.

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For further information about **Fibromyalgia** and **FMSupport**, or for information on becoming a member of FMSupport please contact us:

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