

## Treating Fibromyalgia

Until a few years ago, fibromyalgia was virtually unheard of. The disease, though quite common, was not widely understood until recently. Fortunately, people who live with fibromyalgia now have several treatment options available to them.

**What is Fibromyalgia?** Fibromyalgia is a type of arthritis that primarily affects women. Chances are, someone you know is one of over ten million Americans who suffer from this painful condition. The majority of those diagnosed with fibromyalgia are women between the ages of 40 and 55.

**Symptoms** Fibromyalgia is most often characterized by sensations of widespread pain and intense fatigue. The actual symptoms of fibromyalgia are similar to those of other types of arthritis, making a positive diagnosis very difficult. In fact, there was a time when doctors were not aware that the condition existed, but that's all changing. As the disease becomes better known and understood more clearly by patients, doctors and the general public, more treatment options are becoming available to help patients deal with this frustrating and often debilitating condition.

**Treatment** The key to treating fibromyalgia is being able to control the symptoms of the disease. No single treatment works for all fibromyalgia sufferers, because many patients experience unique combinations of symptoms. This inconsistency makes it even more difficult for doctors to properly treat the condition. If you have been diagnosed with fibromyalgia, the first step toward treatment is to discuss your specific symptoms with your doctor.

\* **Pain:** If you suffer primarily with pain, your doctor may focus the treatment on pain relieving medications and therapies. When your doctor begins treating you with a new pain medication, he or she will probably start with the lowest dosage possible. You'll need to be patient, as there may be an extended period of trial and error before you and your doctor achieve the right level of medication to properly treat your symptoms. If you suffer from extreme pain or pressure at a specific tender point, your doctor may prescribe cortisone injections. This method of treatment has proven to be effective for relieving pain in many fibromyalgia patients.

\* **Inflammation:** If your fibromyalgia mainly presents with inflammation, your doctor will likely prescribe an NSAID. This is a non-steroidal class of anti-inflammatory medications. Although NSAIDs can be effective for some patients, others report no substantial degree of improvement or relief.

\* **Depression:** Many fibromyalgia patients report feelings of depression and anxiety. If you suffer from any of these symptoms, your doctor will probably prescribe some form of anti-depressant medication. The inability to sleep can also compound these feelings of depression, and add to the fatigue that so many fibromyalgia patients report. Doctors may prescribe anti-depressants or sleep aids to help ease the patient into sleep, while increasing the amount of serotonin in the patient's bloodstream.

It's important that your doctor balance these drugs very carefully, particularly if you're taking both pain medication and an anti-depressant. You and your doctor should be working toward the mutual goal of controlling the symptoms of fibromyalgia with few or no side effects.

There are many non-drug treatment options for fibromyalgia patients as well. Exercise has been shown to reduce the overall feelings of pain and fatigue that so many patients experience. Many patients also experience substantial relief through heat pads, shower therapies, and water exercise. Heat appears to offer substantial relief for muscle pain, so any form of warm water therapy or exercise is recommended for fibromyalgia sufferers.

Fibromyalgia is certainly not a new disease, but modern medicine has brought about new treatments that can make it more manageable. If you feel that your symptoms may indicate the presence of fibromyalgia, speak with your doctor. With proper diagnosis, it's now easier than ever before to avoid the causes, treat the symptoms and live comfortably with the disease.