



FROM THE OFFICE OF DR.

# Living with fibromyalgia

Fibromyalgia is a condition that causes chronic pain in muscles, tendons, and joints all over the body, especially along the spine. Other common symptoms include headaches, fatigue, bowel irritability that causes diarrhea to alternate with constipation, and sleep disturbances.

No one is sure what causes the condition, although some physicians believe that patients with fibromyalgia are more sensitive to pain than those without it. Stress, infection, or physical trauma (being in a car accident for example) may initially trigger the condition. Although fibromyalgia is not curable, it does not damage the nerves or muscles or cause any long-term health problems.

## How is fibromyalgia diagnosed?

The diagnosis of fibromyalgia is based on a combination of factors, including a complete medical history and physical exam (to exclude other illnesses that may have similar symptoms such as rheumatoid arthritis, muscle inflammation, bursitis, or tendinitis). A doctor may also check for the presence of very tender areas ("tender points") at specific locations on the body. People who have fibromyalgia experience abnormal sensitivity when light pressure is applied to many of the tender points.

## Treatment

Symptoms can be managed in a variety of ways:

- **Medications.** To help control problems with pain, sleep, and bowel irritability, your physician may ask you to take an antidepressant drug such as amitriptyline (Elavil), cyclobenzaprine (Flexeril), venlafaxine (Effexor), or bupropion

(Wellbutrin). No medications completely relieve fibromyalgia pain. However, taking acetaminophen (Tylenol, for example) can also help.

- **Exercise.** Participating in aerobic exercise (brisk walking, biking, swimming, and water aerobics) for 1/2 hour three times each week is an important step to improve fibromyalgia symptoms. Exercise increases heart and lung function and stretches tight, sore muscles. Your physician can help you choose an exercise program that is right for you.

- **Relaxation techniques.** Evaluating the causes of stress (financial burdens or difficulties with a boss, coworker, or spouse) and learning new ways to handle or cope may improve fibromyalgia. Anxiety and depression are major contributors to stress and must be treated for fibromyalgia to improve. Relaxation techniques can help relieve muscle tension and reduce stress. Professionals trained in stress management can teach you these techniques.

## What is the long-term outlook for people with fibromyalgia?

Once stress-producing situations resolve, fibromyalgia often spontaneously improves and medications may not be necessary. Many people with fibromyalgia will continue to have symptoms at times despite treatment, especially when stress continues unrelieved. However, medication often improves symptoms. When other forms of therapy such as acetaminophen and aerobic exercise are combined to treat fibromyalgia, even more improvement can be expected.



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