

Fibromyalgia Update

New findings reveal clues to the “invisible” syndrome

A recent study in France continues to build the case that fibromyalgia—a chronic condition marked by widespread pain and tenderness—is linked to abnormalities in the way the brain processes pain signals. Researchers compared brain scans of people with fibromyalgia with those of healthy participants and noted that fibromyalgia patients had increased blood flow in areas of the brain that sense pain intensity, as well as decreased blood flow in areas linked to emotional pain response. The study found that fibromyalgia is not a side effect of depression, as some researchers suggest, but rather a result of abnormal brain function. Further research is needed to understand what triggers the abnormalities.

Despite newer fibromyalgia medications, I continue to prefer natural approaches as a first course for treatment. Nancy Selfridge, MD, chief of the complementary medicine department for Group Health Cooperative of South Central Wisconsin, believes mind-body techniques may do more to relieve fibromyalgia pain than popular drugs such as Lyrica and Cymbalta. Here are a few recommendations from Dr. Selfridge, who recovered fully from her own battle with this debilitating condition.

Do inner work. Dr. Selfridge says most who suffer from fibromyalgia report that their symptoms began after a stressful period or a traumatic event such as the death of a loved one or a job layoff. She believes research will eventually indicate that emotionally traumatic experiences may serve as catalysts for physiological changes in pain processing. She advises patients to make a timeline of the events that preceded their illness, and journal about those experiences to pinpoint the trauma and begin healing it. A good psychotherapist can help with this process, and practicing meditation regularly may aid in reducing associated stress.

Make an effort to move. Exercise is a “mainstay of fibromyalgia treatment,” Dr. Selfridge says. It often hurts for the first few weeks, but over time, physical activity lessens pain and improves functioning. Begin with gentle, low-impact activities such as using a stationary bike for five minutes, three times a week, and aim to add a half-minute every few days. Or hit the pool: A February 2008 study also found that eight months of water aerobics in a warm pool improved quality of life for women with fibromyalgia.

Clean up your diet. Fortify your body’s natural healing system by eating plenty of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and increase your intake of omega-3 fatty acids. Eliminate trans fats, limit saturated and polyunsaturated fats, and opt for slow-digesting carbohydrates.

Check your vitamin D status. Dr. Selfridge recommends that all fibromyalgia patients have their vitamin D levels tested, as recent studies suggest that vitamin D deficiency (levels lower than 50 nanograms per milliliter, per the Vitamin D Council) can cause musculoskeletal pain. If the test reveals a deficiency, work with your doctor to determine the best dose to boost your vitamin D levels.

Get better sleep. People with fibromyalgia often don’t sleep well, experiencing periods of lighter sleep instead of reaching deep sleep, a restorative period that allows the body to repair tissue damage. To mitigate, try to stick to a sleep schedule, as a lack of deep sleep has been shown to intensify pain. Rubin Naiman, PhD, sleep expert at the Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine, says melatonin may help improve sleep in some. He also recommends asking your doctor about the narcolepsy drug Xyrem (sodium oxybate), which studies suggest can help minimize the sleep disruptions experienced by fibromyalgia patients, while also lessening pain and fatigue.