Fibromyalgia

The basics

Women’s Stress Disorders
Treatment Program
William S. Middleton VA Hospital
2500 Overlook Terrace
Madison, WI 53705
608-280-7084
What is fibromyalgia?

According to the Arthritis Foundation, a fibromyalgia (FM) diagnosis is based on having all of these symptoms:

- A history of widespread pain on both sides of the body, above and below the waist, present for at least three months
- Pain in at least 11 of 18 tender point sites and in all four quadrants of the body
What are “tender points”?

- These are areas of the body that are very sensitive to pressure.
- These are the most common areas in which people experience pain, but often people with FM have pain in other areas as well.
Does this cause damage?

No. Unlike arthritis, FM does not damage joints or cause inflammation. Although FM tends to remain an issue once you have it, it doesn’t cause progressive damage and is not life-threatening.

FM is considered a soft-tissue rheumatism by doctors.
Will it ever improve?

According to Daniel J. Wallace, people who are diagnosed early and take steps to manage their symptoms are likely to improve.
What’s involved in managing symptoms?

- Having a healthy diet
- Reducing alcohol intake
- Quitting smoking
- Engaging in some physical activity and exercise
- Reducing stress
- Learning to work well with medical providers

Women’s Stress Disorders Treatment Program
William S. Middleton VA Hospital
2500 Overlook Terrace
Madison, WI 53705
608-280-7084
What problems do people with fibromyalgia face most often?

- Pain seems to be the most common and most distressing problem.

- Fatigue - between 60 and 80 percent of people with FM complain of moderate to severe fatigue. This can include feeling listless, mentally exhausted, sleepy, or waking up feeling tired.
What else?

◆ Sleep problems are also common. It may be hard to fall asleep or stay asleep. People with FM seem to have difficulty getting deep (what scientists call “delta”) sleep.

◆ Mood changes including depression and anxiety sometimes accompany FM.
Some people with FM may feel confused, have difficulty remembering things or have a hard time concentrating. This seems to be associated with poor sleep.

Other problems sometimes occur in combination with FM, including irritable bowel syndrome, headaches, or temporomandibular joint disorder (TMJ).
Who tends to get fibromyalgia?

- About 2% of Americans, or one in 50.
- Women between the ages of 40 and 75 are most likely, though younger women, men and children may also have FM.
- Sometimes it occurs in more than one family member, but scientists have not yet found a genetic link.
How come no one told me years ago this pain was fibromyalgia?

- Diagnosing FM involves ruling out other conditions first, which is often a long process.
- FM does not show up on x-rays or in lab tests.
- FM as a diagnosis is relatively new, so some doctors may not have known about it until recently.
What causes fibromyalgia?

- The short answer is that scientists do not know for sure.
- Some think an injury, physical or emotional, may change the central nervous system’s response to pain.
- Others believe hormonal changes or infections may trigger FM.
Some researchers are exploring whether lack of exercise or too much exercise may be the cause.

Sleep disturbance may also be a cause.

Although depression and FM tend to go together, we don’t know if depression causes or is the result of FM.
Possible causes, continued...

- People with FM may process hormones differently than those people without FM.
- The hormones being investigated regarding their possible role in FM include:
  - Substance P
  - Serotonin
  - Hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) hormones
  - Growth hormones
The mind–body link

- People’s bodies sometimes express feelings and stress through physical symptoms.
- FM is a condition that is very influenced by feelings and stress.
- It is one of the syndromes called “functional somatic syndromes” (other examples are irritable bowel syndrome and chronic fatigue syndrome).
So it’s all in my head?

- Definitely not.
- Everyone’s body is affected by emotions and stress, but some people’s bodies seem to react more intensely than others.