

Expert advice on your wellbeing queries



Q My mother has been diagnosed with fibromyalgia. She takes drugs for the pain (amitriptyline) and insomnia (zopiclone), both of which have unpleasant side effects. Can you advise any alternative remedies and also the best diet and exercise?

A Fibromyalgia is a chronic condition affecting about five per cent of the population, mostly women of childbearing age. The outstanding feature is pain, especially soreness or stiffness of the muscles, tendons and ligaments. The type and intensity of this pain varies enormously. It can occur anywhere in the body and may be widespread or limited to one area. Women typically experience more generalised pain, whereas men tend to develop symptoms in one region, such as the shoulder.

Although not life-threatening, fibromyalgia can be debilitating and distressing. Symptoms typically begin in one's teens or 20s and may come and go in cycles. They include:

Pain: mostly deep, muscular aching that burns, throbs or stabs. Pain and stiffness are often worse in the morning.

Fatigue: feeling drained of energy and unable to concentrate; this can vary from mild to incapacitating.

Sleep disorders: disturbed sleep patterns cause sufferers to wake up feeling exhausted.

Chemical sensitivity: about half of all sufferers experience sensitivities to smells, foods, medications, noise and bright lights.

Chronic headaches: affect about half of all patients.

Irritable bowel syndrome: 40 to 70 per cent experience diarrhoea, constipation, abdominal pain and wind.

Other common symptoms are dizziness or lightheadedness, menstrual cramping, jaw pain, and numbness or tingling sensations.

With fibromyalgia, it is important to separate the cause from the 'triggering event'. A study published last year by rheumatologist Dr Daniel Clauw from the University of Michigan showed that patients with fibromyalgia found any touch or pressure painful. This may be down to certain chemical and hormonal imbalances: sufferers have higher than normal levels of 'substance P', a neurotransmitter carrying pain signals to the brain, and lower than normal levels of serotonin and noradrenalin, which moderate pain.

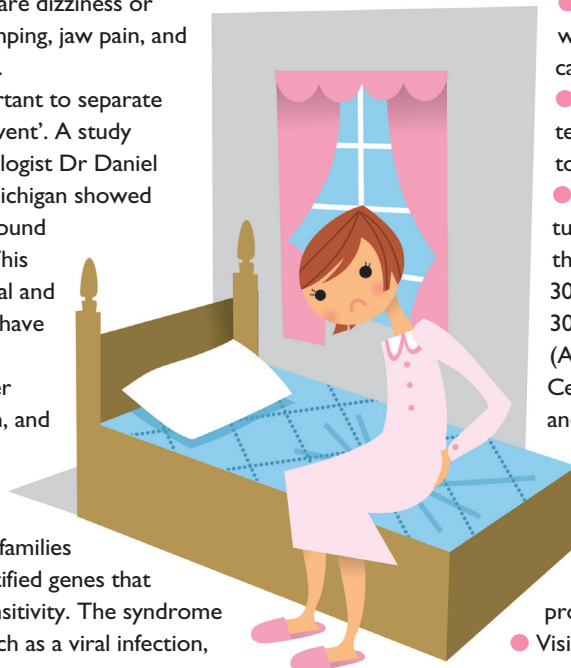
Fibromyalgia tends to run in families and researchers have now identified genes that may be involved in the supersensitivity. The syndrome is usually triggered by events such as a viral infection,

emotional stress, an injury or exposure to some drugs or chemicals (eg, fumes of volatile solvents).

Many doctors refuse to believe that fibromyalgia is a real disease, especially since patients often look well and objective tests are normal. Also, the list of symptoms are common to many conditions and can be stress-related, both of which make diagnosis difficult.

I can suggest a number of ways to help manage fibromyalgia:

- One of the most effective remedies is to take regular, moderate, physical activity for at least 30 minutes a day. Muscle pain may increase during exercise but usually goes within 30 minutes. Stretching and low-impact aerobic activity are best (eg, swimming, walking, yoga, stationary bikes or elliptical trainers). If symptoms are linked to ME, exercise may be counterproductive, so check with your GP.
- The Feldenkrais Method, which features gentle movement exercises, helps correct poor posture or habits of movement that may be contributing to pain (feldenkrais.co.uk).
- Correct any sleeping disorder. This is critical for reducing pain and improving energy and mood. Try the herbal sedative valerian to help you come off sleeping pills. Your GP may refer you to a sleep specialist.
- Use relaxation techniques. Studies show sufferers benefit greatly from meditation, yoga and breath work.
- Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) can teach you ways of coping with symptoms and stress. (Your GP can refer you, although there may be a waiting list.)
- Acupuncture or light (Swedish) massage can temporarily relieve pain and stiffness and help you towards recovery in the longer term.
- Follow an anti-inflammatory diet, eating ginger and turmeric regularly, or taking supplements containing them (try TurmericForce by New Chapter, £14.49 for 30 capsules and GingerForce by New Chapter £14.99 for 30 capsules). Try a daily antioxidant multivitamin-mineral (All Natural Perfectly Balanced by Natural Nutrition Centre £23.95 for 120 tablets), plus 250mg of magnesium and 500-700mg of calcium daily to help relax and maintain healthy nerves and muscles (DynaMins Magnesium by Nature's Plus £12.89 for 90 tablets and Calcium Chewable 600mg by HealthAid £4.99 for 60 tablets). NB Men should avoid calcium supplements as they may increase the risk of prostate cancer by using up vitamin D in the gland.
- Visit fibromyalgia-associationuk.org for support groups.



E-mail your questions to Dr Weil at s.stacey@you.co.uk Dr Weil regrets that he cannot answer all e-mails personally, nor enter into personal correspondence. Always consult a qualified medical practitioner in the first instance if you have a specific medical condition or are pregnant, or if your symptoms persist.

All products mentioned, unless otherwise specified, are available by mail order from Victoria Health, tel: 0800 3898 195; victoriahealth.com

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