

# Fibromyalgia Explained

In recent years, medical professionals have been paying greater attention to the causes and treatments of fibromyalgia. Still, the condition remains largely unknown to the general public, and even those who suffer from it.

Fibromyalgia is a disease that falls under the general classification of arthritis. The condition has become popular, simply because it is so difficult to diagnose and to treat.

## Diagnosing Fibromyalgia

Why is it so difficult for doctors to diagnose fibromyalgia? Much of the mystery lies in the fact that the basic symptoms greatly resemble other forms of arthritis. Doctors and patients must go through a lengthy process of ruling out other conditions, before a positive diagnosis can be made. It can be four or five years after the initial doctor's visit before the patient can be sure that he or she suffers with fibromyalgia. Clearly, the uncertainty and anxiety that the patient endures in the interim can be every bit as physically and emotionally taxing as the disease itself.

Fortunately, as doctors begin to have a clearer understanding of the condition, and health care professionals become better educated, they are becoming more adept at making adequate diagnoses. Where this famously elusive condition taunted the medical world for many years, doctors are now able to piece together the puzzle and offer faster, more reliable treatments to their patients.

## Symptoms of Fibromyalgia

If you've heard of fibromyalgia and wonder whether you may have it, you'll need to know the most common symptoms. Discussing these medical matters with your doctor is the first step toward a positive diagnosis.

Most fibromyalgia patients list pain as their primary symptom. Unlike other forms of arthritis, the pain associated with fibromyalgia is not centered on a specific muscle or joint. Instead, patients report a feeling of widespread, all-over pain. For some, it is deep, sharp and throbbing; and while this pain is felt throughout the body, many fibromyalgia patients also report having 'tender spots' where the discomfort is felt more sharply if the area is pressed. Doctors have narrowed down the number of tender points to eighteen specific areas. In order to receive a positive fibromyalgia diagnosis, the doctor and patient are typically expected to identify at least eleven tender spots. In some cases, however, a patient may still be diagnosed with fibromyalgia, even if he or she experiences pain in fewer than eleven of the so-called 'tender spots'.

Along with the feeling of widespread pain, fatigue is the other prominent symptom of fibromyalgia. Patients describe this sense of fatigue as crippling and overwhelming. Even patients who receive an adequate amount (eight or more hours) of sleep at night may still experience severe fatigue throughout the day.

## Other Symptoms

There are other symptoms that may indicate the presence of fibromyalgia:

- \* Along with pain and fatigue, the typical fibromyalgia patient may also experience stiffness in the joints, particularly in the morning.
- \* Many patients find it difficult to fall asleep, or stay asleep. Researchers have discovered that most fibromyalgia patients have low serotonin levels, which can contribute to their inability to sleep.
- \* Lower levels of serotonin may also be related to the depression and anxiety that is experienced by many fibromyalgia patients.
- \* Most fibromyalgia patients also report experiencing frequent headaches and migraines.
- \* Fibromyalgia may cause swelling of the extremities and tingling in the hands, legs, arms, and feet.
- \* Some fibromyalgia sufferers report symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome.

Fibromyalgia often appears in conjunction with other forms of arthritis, resulting in difficulty for the doctor to make a clear and definite diagnosis. There are more than 100 forms of arthritis, and any one of these can appear with symptoms of fibromyalgia. Doctors most commonly report treating patients who suffer from combined rheumatoid arthritis and fibromyalgia.

If you show a combination of the symptoms listed above, ask your doctor to work with you in ruling out fibromyalgia. If he

or she is not aware of the symptoms, including the eighteen 'tender spots', ask for a referral to a specialist in the types of arthritis, particularly fibromyalgia.