



Sue Ann Says: Fibromyalgia is real and it's treatable

We all feel achy and tired sometimes. We might chalk it up to being overworked or just plain stressed. But how much pain is too much pain? How tired is too tired?

Fibromyalgia is the most common chronic pain condition in the country, and perhaps one of the most misunderstood. Women account for 80 to 90 percent of diagnosed cases. But because symptoms often flare up and then disappear, many women dismiss their symptoms. Until recently, when fibromyalgia began to receive more widespread attention, doctors often were frustrated by their inability to reach a diagnosis when their patients presented with pain and fatigue. It wasn't uncommon for women to be told their symptoms were "all in your head" or "you'll just have to live with it."

I learned a lot about fibromyalgia from Shilagh Mirgain, PhD, a health psychologist and assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin Madison School of Medicine and Public Health. She emphasized that fibromyalgia is very real, but is not progressive or life threatening.

This chronic condition is characterized by widespread pain, stiffness, and tenderness in muscles, ligaments, joints, and tendons. Fatigue and sleep disturbance are common. In addition to pain and fatigue, other symptoms may include:

- heightened sensitivity to odors, light, and noise
- headaches
- irritable bowel syndrome
- painful menstrual periods
- restless leg syndrome
- psychological symptoms such as depression, anxiety, irritability and mood changes
- cognitive symptoms including concentration and memory problems

Dr. Mirgain recommended that if you have widespread pain and fatigue for several months, it's time to check it out.

Diagnosis is tricky

Diagnosing fibromyalgia often is difficult, however. There are no specific diagnostic tests for fibromyalgia and the primary symptoms of pain and fatigue are common to many other diseases. After ruling out other possible causes of the symptoms, doctors will look for pain lasting at least three months in all four quadrants of the body: left and right side, above and below the waist. Doctors also look for "tender points," places that are painful when pressure is applied. In addition to the duration of widespread pain and fatigue, a diagnosis is based on the patient having pain in at least 11 of 18 tender points in multiple areas of the body such as the neck, shoulder, lower back, leg, or elbow.

Potential causes

There aren't any specific known causes of fibromyalgia. Dr. Mirgain outlined a few possible theories: traumatic injury, especially to the upper spinal region; a bacterial or viral infection; psychological stress or trauma, or hormonal changes. It's also possible, she told me, that people with fibromyalgia experience pain in response to stimuli that aren't normally seen as painful. "Individuals with fibromyalgia may have a central nervous system that is super sensitive, known as central sensitization," Dr. Mirgain told me. "That can include an abnormal increase in certain chemicals in the brain that signal pain, or a lower threshold for pain."

Treatment

If fibromyalgia is so difficult to diagnose, it must be just as difficult to treat, right? Well, it's true; there is no "magic cure." "Treatment focuses on minimizing symptoms and improving the quality of life," Dr. Mirgain explained. She recommends a multi-disciplinary team approach tailored to each individual. Your treatment team might include a doctor who assesses your condition and manages your medications to treat pain, depression, sleep problems and other symptoms. You also may work with a physical therapist and a psychologist. "Cognitive behavioral therapy can be beneficial for many," Dr. Mirgain emphasized. "It helps change an individual's thinking about chronic pain and the behavioral response to pain." Behavioral therapy and counseling can also help women learn how to adapt their lifestyle, regulate their mood, and increase their network of social and emotional support.

It is also vital to learn what triggers your symptoms. Is it weather? Stress? "Learning about your symptoms and what triggers them helps you better manage the complexity of living with a chronic pain condition," Dr. Mirgain said.

As with any illness, it's important to educate yourself and find resources to help. The National Fibromyalgia Association has a wealth of resources on its web site at www.fmaware.org.

If you're living with fibromyalgia, it's especially important to reduce stress, maintain a healthy lifestyle and practice good sleep habits. Plan a specific time each day when you will simply relax. Give yourself permission to go a little easier on yourself, because it all begins with a healthy woman.

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