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Fibromyalgia: Making the Diagnosis

By Linda Melone

The fibromyalgia symptoms your doctor will look for

Diagnosing fibromyalgia can be challenging for the physician and frustrating for the patient. This is because fibromyalgia symptoms vary from person to person and can be similar to those of many other common conditions. Fibromyalgia's classic chronic pain symptoms, for instance, can mimic those related to arthritis, depression, and even multiple sclerosis.

In addition, there is no specific diagnostic laboratory test for fibromyalgia. In fact, blood tests and X-rays are often normal. This means that a diagnosis has to be based on a patient's report of his or her symptoms and on a physician's physical exam. Because so many complicating factors are involved, it often takes a specialist, usually a rheumatologist, to make a firm diagnosis.

Diagnosing Fibromyalgia: Who Is at Risk?

Fibromyalgia affects 2 to 4 percent of the U.S. population, and it predominantly affects women. "Fibromyalgia affects three times as many women as men," says Dr. Jacob Teitelbaum, medical director of the Fibromyalgia and Fatigue Centers of America and the author of *From Fatigued to Fantastic!* (Avery) although some studies suggest that this number may be closer to ten times as many women, most of whom are diagnosed between the ages of 20 and 50. But the condition can also affect men, and it can occur in people of all ages.

Other risk factors for fibromyalgia include having a family history of the condition, having a sleep disorder such as restless legs syndrome or sleep apnea, and suffering from a rheumatic disease such as lupus or rheumatoid arthritis.

Complicating the diagnosis further, many fibromyalgia sufferers also have a related condition called chronic fatigue syndrome, which is considered a separate disorder, according to Dr. Teitelbaum. Between 50 and 70 percent of people with fibromyalgia fit the criteria for chronic fatigue syndrome, and vice versa. The pain patients experience in fibromyalgia is also similar to the joint pain of arthritis, though fibromyalgia does not cause actual joint damage like arthritis.

Diagnosing Fibromyalgia: Common Symptoms

"Fatigue, aches, brain fog (meaning difficulty with short-term memory, word finding, and word substitution), and insomnia sum up the hallmark symptoms of fibromyalgia," says Dr. Teitelbaum. "If you can't sleep, even though you're exhausted, and you have widespread chronic muscle pain lasting longer than three months, you may have fibromyalgia." Sufferers often say that the muscular aches and pains of fibromyalgia are similar to the body aches associated with the flu. The pain — variously described as throbbing, shooting, stabbing, and aching — and the stiffness may be worse in the morning.

To determine whether you have fibromyalgia, your doctor will ask you questions regarding the degree to which you experience the following symptoms.

Pain: In fibromyalgia, muscle pain encompasses the entire body — above and below the waist, and on both the right and left sides of the body. Muscles used repeatedly tend to hurt more. Patients feel stiff and find it difficult and painful to move. Although their joints are not visibly swollen, patients often report a sensation of swelling in their joints along with joint pain.

Fatigue: Symptoms of fatigue can range from mild to incapacitating in patients with fibromyalgia; many report feeling "drained" of energy. Brain fog and an inability to concentrate often go hand in hand with the fatigue.

Sleep disruptions: Fibromyalgia sufferers often fall asleep normally but wake up frequently during the night. And even when they get plenty of sleep, people with fibromyalgia report waking up exhausted.

Digestive problems: Irritable bowel syndrome, constipation, diarrhea, nausea, and abdominal pain occur in 40 to 70 percent of fibromyalgia patients, along with gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), or acid reflux.

Weight gain: Many people with fibromyalgia experience weight gain because of metabolic changes that occur as a result of the disease. "We've found an average weight gain of 32.5 pounds among fibromyalgia sufferers, which may happen within six months or over the course of several years," says Dr. Teitelbaum.

Decreased physical functioning: This important feature of fibromyalgia can be measured with the Fibromyalgia Impact Questionnaire (FIQ), developed by clinicians at Oregon Health & Science University.

Other changes in health: Many patients with fibromyalgia experience light-headedness or dizziness, anxiety, and depression. Irritable bladder, noncardiac chest pain, and migraine headaches may also occur and can become more severe during times of stress, in cold or drafty environments, or when infections, allergies, hormonal fluctuations, depression, or anxiety are present.

Diagnosing Fibromyalgia: What Your Doctor Will Look For

Since no diagnostic lab test for fibromyalgia currently exists, your doctor's physical exam plays a key role in determining whether you have the condition. Your doctor will probably start by taking a health history. Blood tests and X-rays may then be ordered to help rule out other possibilities, such as rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, and multiple sclerosis, whose symptoms can be similar to those of fibromyalgia. "Testing may also include hormonal tests (thyroid, adrenal, estrogen, testosterone, and so on), tests for immune function and for dietary deficiencies (most often iron and B₁₂)," says Dr. Teitelbaum.

According to guidelines created by the American College of Rheumatology in 1991, a diagnosis of fibromyalgia requires that you have experienced widespread, aching pain for at least three months and have a minimum of 11 locations on your body that are abnormally sensitive to pain when touched with relatively mild but firm pressure. Called tender points, these spots are found in 18 specific places on the head, upper body, and certain joints. People with fibromyalgia have very strong reactions to even mild pressure on these tender points; your physician may also use the same level of pressure on nontender points (called control points) to compare your reaction.



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