

IT'S COMPLEX, IT'S FRUSTRATING

Fibromyalgia Can Challenge The Patients & The Doctors

It is common for patients with fibromyalgia to be frustrated. They know they have chronic pain, but they don't know why it's there or how to relieve it. In some cases, they may even have trouble convincing their family members, or their doctors, that the pain is real.

This elusive illness often "masquerades" behind other rheumatic diseases. Well, it doesn't really hide, it's just difficult for doctors to see among other illnesses that have very similar symptoms. Complexity is added when symptoms come and go, and vary in their intensity. On top of that, successful treatment of a co-existing rheumatic disease usually does not effect the similar fibromyalgia symptoms.

So patients and doctors can get very frustrated. An important step in alleviating the frustration is an accurate diagnosis. However, this may be easier said than done.



A well cushioned pair of walking shoes can help in dealing with fibromyalgia. Having a walking partner can add a level of safety and enjoyable social contact.

DIAGNOSIS

Doctors have their hands tied when it comes to diagnosing fibromyalgia. First of all, blood tests and imaging techniques are not useful since they do not uncover abnormalities. Secondly, many of the symptoms mimic those of other diseases.

Most often, diagnosis is based on three things.

- ◆ Chronic pain lasting for more than three months.
- ◆ A review of a patient's medical history.
- ◆ Aching "pain points". These are areas of muscles tender to touch, and they feel like a hard spot when the muscle is rubbed. Pain in 11 of the 18 points signal fibromyalgia.

Age can also influence diagnosis. In those over 60, doctors may find more soft tissue swelling, fatigue and depression, with less of an emphasis on pain. To provide clarity and reach an accurate diagnosis, doctors may ask their patients to keep a diary of their symptoms.

EXERCISE MAY BE GOOD

Treatment of fibromyalgia can also be frustrating for seniors and their doctors. One of the "trial and error" options that is showing increased evidence of improvement is exercise. This can turn into an uncomfortable choice for seniors because it often hurts. However, many who work to develop an exercise regimen have worthwhile improvement.

A major key seems to be the avoidance of impact. So jogging and aerobics classes are out. Here are some low-impact suggestions.

- ◆ Walking.
- ◆ Riding a stationary bike or elliptical trainer.
- ◆ Activities that combine stretching, breathing, movement and control. Common options are tai chi and yoga.
- ◆ Swimming and exercising in the pool. (To add safety, flotation devices can be used.)

Note: Do not begin a new program when your symptoms are flaring. Wait until they are normal.

(Sources: National Fibromyalgia Assn., FMpartnership.org, Fibromyalgia-Symptoms.org)

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