

Disability Insight

Take a look around you

Fibromyalgia Awareness Day

28th November 2019

Key points

- As many as 1.5 million to 2 million people in the UK may have Fibromyalgia
- **Fibro** refers to fibrous tissue, **my** refers to muscles and **algia** refers to pain.
- The prominent feature of Fibromyalgia (FMS) is chronic, widespread musculoskeletal pain.
- It is often characterized by additional pain when firm pressure is applied to specific areas of the body. These are known as tender points.
- There are several accompanying symptoms of the condition including fatigue and muscle stiffness
- Symptoms vary from person to person and from day to day. They can often be aggravated by physical and environmental factors
- The condition affects people of all age, racial/ethnic and economic groups, though is more prevalent among women.

1 About Fibromyalgia

Fibromyalgia is a chronic condition known as a syndrome because it refers to a collection of symptoms. Unlike other conditions such as arthritis, the pain associated with fibromyalgia is not directly caused by damage or injury to the area that's hurting. Instead there appears to be a problem with the way the brain and nervous system process pain from that area. As there is no physical damage that can be healed there's no easy way to stop the pain. The severity of symptoms is affected by a number of factors including stress, physical activity, weather conditions and the time of day. Fibromyalgia can be described as a hidden illness as symptoms may not be immediately obvious to others. Diagnosis is difficult as symptoms can overlap with those of other conditions such as ME and rheumatoid arthritis or because an individual may be suffering from more than one condition. The most widely used criteria for diagnosis are:

- Having severe pain in 3 to 6 different areas of the body or milder pain in 7 or more different areas.

- Having symptoms that have persisted at a similar level for at least 3 months.
- Having no other reason for symptoms.

In addition to the different types of pain, other Fibromyalgia symptoms include:

- **Fatigue**
- **Stiff joints and muscles**
- **Cognitive difficulties known as ‘fibro fog’**
- **Sleep issues**
- **Digestive problems**
- **Headaches or migraines**
- **Increased sensitivity to pain**
- **Extreme sensitivity to surroundings**
- **Depression or anxiety**

What are the Causes of Fibromyalgia?

The exact cause of Fibromyalgia is unclear. Rather than having a single source it is thought there are a number of contributing factors including: abnormal pain signals in the central nervous system; chemical imbalances (low levels of serotonin, noradrenaline and dopamine); trauma (physical and emotional) and genetics.

What Treatments are Available for Fibromyalgia?

Although there is no cure for Fibromyalgia, there are a number of treatments and therapies that many people find helpful:

- **Physical therapies.** These include physiotherapy and occupational therapy to allow patients to become more active and better manage day to day activities
- **Psychological therapies.** For example Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and relaxation techniques to improve both emotional well-being and physical health
- **Drug treatments.** Painkillers and anti-depressants that help to manage pain and regulate sleep

In addition there are a number of self-management strategies that are used by people with Fibromyalgia to cope with their symptoms such as diet, exercise, complementary therapies and techniques to improve sleeping.

2 How does Fibromyalgia affect someone's life?

People with mild to moderate cases of fibromyalgia are usually able to live a relatively normal life, given the appropriate treatment. If symptoms are severe however, day to day activities can become a struggle. Not surprisingly, a combination of pain, sleep disturbance and anxiety or depression can turn into a vicious circle. Severe symptoms will impact a person physically, emotionally and socially and without proper support can lead to withdrawal from employment (or promotion opportunities), avoidance of physical activity, fewer leisure activities and social isolation. Please click on the links below to read a real life story of someone living with fibromyalgia and to see a video on living with chronic pain:

<https://www.theguardian.com/global/2018/sep/01/pain-rollercoaster-fibromyalgia-kirsty-young-desert-island-discs>
<https://www.myni.life/pain-management>

3 Supporting someone with Fibromyalgia in work

Many people with fibromyalgia continue to work full or part time. However, the chronic pain and fatigue associated with the condition can make working very difficult. As a result, the individual and their employer may need to develop a program of pain management and also work out a daily regime to help manage symptoms. Awareness and support from colleagues and managers can make a considerable difference to the working life of someone with fibromyalgia. In order to support people with fibromyalgia in work, some reasonable adjustments that can be adopted include:

- Implementing ergonomic workstations e.g. use of headsets to prevent neck strain, lumbar supports to support lower back
- Reducing or eliminating physical exertion
- Providing to-do lists and written instructions
- Providing memory aids, such as schedulers or organizers
- Providing sensitivity training to co-workers
- Providing information on counselling and employee support programs
- Allowing a self-paced workload or flexible work schedule
- Allowing periodic rest periods to reorient
- Allowing flexible working hours and flexible use of leave time
- Allowing the employee to work from home

For an article on fibromyalgia in the workplace please follow the link below:

<https://themighty.com/2017/08/working-with-fibromyalgia/>

4 Support for you if you care for somebody with Fibromyalgia

Caring for someone with fibromyalgia, whether they are severely affected or experience occasional flare ups only, will mean coming to terms with certain lifestyle changes. In order to accept these changes it will help to learn about the condition and speak openly about the potential financial, emotional and social issues that may arise. Discussing how these can be addressed and tackling them one at a time can make you feel more in control. It's important that you don't feel alone and that you involve your loved one as much as possible as well as friends, family, doctors, social services and anyone who may be able to offer support. See below for more information on accessing support.

Fibromyalgia Support N. Ireland (FMSNI) is a non-profit organisation dedicated to providing help and support to people who have fibromyalgia and those who care for them. Their mission is to provide an organisation where those with fibromyalgia can find understanding, knowledge, support and practical help in fighting the disease. Contact on **02890355655** Monday – Friday 10.30am - 4.00pm.

To find out more about support groups in your local area please click the link below: <https://www.fmsni.org.uk/index.php/support/52-groups-ni>

5 Support for you if you have Fibromyalgia

Whilst a diagnosis can be a relief following the frustration of unexplained symptoms, there is also a natural grieving of the life that was previously envisaged and acceptance can be difficult. It's important to express these feelings and talk to others about their experiences. They can provide support, understanding and coping strategies that will help you to feel empowered.

Support groups

Many people with fibromyalgia find that support groups provide an important network where they can talk to others living with the condition. These include:

[Hope 4 M.E. & Fibro Northern Ireland](#)

[Fibromyalgia Support Northern Ireland](#)

[Fibromyalgia Awareness Northern Ireland](#)

Sources and further reading:

<https://www.fmsni.org.uk/>

<http://www.fmauk.org/>

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/fibromyalgia/>

<https://www.versusarthritis.org/about-arthritis/conditions/fibromyalgia/>

<https://hope4mefibro.org/>

