



Fibromyalgia

Your questions answered

Q. What is fibromyalgia?

A. Fibromyalgia is a common, long-term (or chronic) condition that causes widespread pain and tenderness in many parts of the body. People with fibromyalgia often experience physical and mental tiredness (fatigue), problems with memory and concentration, and poor sleep.

Around two to five per cent of Australians live with fibromyalgia, and it's more common in women. It's also more common in people with conditions such as [rheumatoid arthritis](#) and [lupus](#).

The good news is fibromyalgia can be effectively treated with self-care and medicine.

Note: Fibromyalgia shouldn't be confused with a similar sounding condition called [polymyalgia rheumatica](#). It too causes widespread pain, but it also causes inflammation in the joints and the surrounding tissues.

Q. What causes fibromyalgia?

A. No one knows what causes fibromyalgia.

We do know that the pain isn't caused by damage or injury to the body but has more to do with how the brain and nervous system process pain.

[Pain is your body's alarm system](#). It makes you aware that something may be causing you harm, allowing you to react and protect yourself from that harm. However, the alarm system is stuck on high alert for people with fibromyalgia. It's overprotective, making them more sensitive to pain or the potential threat of pain.

Q. What are the symptoms of fibromyalgia?

A. The signs or symptoms of fibromyalgia vary from person to person; however, the most common are:

- widespread pain and tenderness in many parts of the body
- being more sensitive to pain, touch, heat or cold
- extreme physical and mental tiredness (fatigue)
- sleeping poorly and waking up feeling unrested.

Some people may also experience:

- problems with memory and concentration (fibro fog or brain fog)
- headaches
- [anxiety or depression](#)
- tingling, numbness or swelling of your hands and feet
- [restless legs syndrome](#)
- the need to urinate more often or in a hurry
- [irritable bowel syndrome](#)
- painful menstrual periods.

These symptoms can sometimes worsen, especially when you feel stressed, upset, overdo things, or don't get enough sleep. This is called a flare or flare-up.

Q. How do I know if I have fibromyalgia?

A. Unfortunately, there are no specific tests (e.g. blood tests, scans or x-rays) that can confirm you have fibromyalgia.

This can make diagnosing difficult, as symptoms vary from person to person, and many conditions may cause these symptoms. However, having widespread pain and fatigue for at least three months is a good indicator that you may have fibromyalgia.

Your doctor will ask you about your symptoms, discuss your medical history, and do a physical examination. They may order tests or scans to rule out other potential causes of your symptoms, such as [rheumatoid arthritis](#), [lupus](#) or [polymyalgia rheumatica](#). They may also refer you to a specialist, such as a [rheumatologist](#). They diagnose and treat fibromyalgia and other musculoskeletal conditions.

Q. How is fibromyalgia treated?

A. While there's no cure for fibromyalgia, your symptoms can be effectively managed.

Fibromyalgia is treated using a range of different treatments, including exercise, cognitive behavioural therapy, medicines and self-care. Your treatment plan will be designed to fit your specific set of symptoms and needs.

Exercise

This is essential to managing your condition. Evidence shows that regular exercise improves fibromyalgia symptoms such as pain, fatigue and poor sleep. When starting an exercise program, you should try to [incorporate exercises](#) that improve flexibility, muscle strength, balance, and overall fitness and endurance. Start exercising slowly and gradually increase the time and intensity of your exercise sessions over weeks and months. And choose exercises you enjoy doing. This will make it easier to be consistent. A physiotherapist or exercise physiologist can help you work out an exercise program that's right for you.

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)

[Cognitive behavioural therapy](#) is a short-term, task-based approach used by psychologists to challenge and change unhelpful ways of thinking. Evidence suggests that CBT can help reduce pain and disability in fibromyalgia.

Medicines

Combined with exercise and self-care, [medicines](#) may be used to manage your pain, help you sleep and stay active. However, not everyone will benefit from their use. Together you and your doctor will decide what's most appropriate for you.

Depending on your symptoms, your doctor may recommend different types of medicines. To date, those found to be most effective in research trials include medicines used to treat depression (antidepressants) and seizures and epilepsy (anticonvulsants). They relieve pain and fatigue and improve sleep quality. You may be prescribed one or a combination of medicines.

Your doctor will start you on the lowest possible dosage and, if necessary, slowly increase the dose until your symptoms are under control. All medicines have side effects, so you should discuss these with your doctor.

Pain-relieving medicines such as paracetamol may sometimes be used for short-term pain relief alongside other medicines.



Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) and **corticosteroids** are effective medicines for reducing inflammation. However, as fibromyalgia doesn't cause inflammation, these medicines are generally not helpful for treating fibromyalgia.

Opioids are powerful pain-relieving medicines that effectively reduce acute pain (or the pain resulting from an injury or surgery). In the past, opioids were prescribed to treat pain associated with conditions like fibromyalgia; however, there's no evidence that they have any effect on this type of pain. Opioids also have many potentially serious side effects. That's why they're not recommended in the management of fibromyalgia.

Q. What else can I do to control my symptoms?

A. There are many other things you can do to reduce the impact of your symptoms.

Learn about your condition. Understanding fibromyalgia and how it affects you means you can make informed decisions about your healthcare and actively manage it.

Learn ways to manage your pain. Pain is the main symptom of fibromyalgia, so learning how to manage it effectively is crucial. Read our [A-Z guide for managing pain](#) for more information.

Improve sleep quality. Not getting enough [good quality sleep](#) can worsen your symptoms; however, getting a good night's sleep when you have fibromyalgia can be challenging. If you're having problems sleeping, talk with your doctor about ways you can address this.

Manage stress. Stress can aggravate your symptoms, so learning to deal with stress is extremely helpful. Things you can do to manage stress include planning your day and setting priorities, using [relaxation techniques](#) such as going for a walk, [getting a massage](#) or [listening to music](#), and, where possible, avoiding people and situations that cause you stress.

Pace yourself. [Pacing](#) is an effective strategy to help you do the things you want to do by finding the right balance between rest and activity (both physical and mental). This will help reduce your risk of flares and fatigue.

Practise mindfulness. [Mindfulness-based therapies](#) (MBT) can help you break away from negative thought patterns. When used in managing fibromyalgia, studies have shown that MBT can help reduce pain and depression and establish better coping strategies for an improved quality of life.

Eating a healthy, balanced diet can help provide you with better energy levels, help to maintain your weight, and give you a greater sense of wellbeing.

Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (TENS). This small [battery-powered machine](#) has leads that connect to sticky pads on your body. It delivers very small electrical currents to your skin, stimulating nerves to relieve pain. While there's insufficient high-quality evidence to say if TENS is effective for treating fibromyalgia symptoms or not, there's evidence to suggest that some people find it helpful in reducing pain and fatigue. If you're thinking of trialling a TENS machine speak with your doctor to see if it's a suitable option. You can often hire one from your physiotherapist, local pharmacy or local hospital.

Acupuncture. There is low to moderate-level evidence that [acupuncture](#) improves pain and stiffness in people with fibromyalgia. However, the effects are short-lived (up to a month), and repeated sessions are needed to maintain any potential benefit.

Support from others is important when you have fibromyalgia. Research has shown that people with positive social support cope better with their pain. Family, friends, colleagues, and health professionals can help you manage. A peer support group may be another option.



Q. Where can I get more help?

A. Many people and support organisations can help you manage your fibromyalgia. They include:

- your doctor
- your rheumatologist
- [physiotherapist](#)
- [exercise physiologist](#)
- Musculoskeletal Australia | msk.org.au | National Arthritis and Back Pain+ Help Line: 1800 263 265

Q. How can Musculoskeletal Australia help?

A. Our nurses are available for you to speak with about fibromyalgia, pain or any other musculoskeletal issues you have. You can contact them on weekdays between 9am-5pm. Phone 1800 263 265 or email helpline@msk.org.au. We also have a range of services – including free webinars – you can access on our [website](#).

More to explore

- [Fibromyalgia](#)
American College of Rheumatology
- [Fibromyalgia](#)
Arthritis Foundation
- [Fibromyalgia](#)
MedlinePlus
- [Fibromyalgia](#)
PainHEALTH
- [Fibromyalgia](#)
Versus Arthritis UK
- [Patient education: Fibromyalgia \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)
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