

Fibromyalgia

As recently as twenty years ago, fibromyalgia was unrecognized. Clinical examinations often revealed no concrete findings. X-rays, blood tests, and muscle biopsies appeared normal, and therefore the symptoms seemed unexplained. Currently, a diagnosis is made by first ruling out other conditions that may mimic its symptoms such as hypothyroidism, lupus, Lyme disease, and rheumatoid arthritis. Then the diagnosis is based upon the patient's history and physical findings. A history of generalized muscle pain and malaise coupled with the finding of 11 of 18 specific tender points is suggestive of fibromyalgia.

Primary symptoms:

- Pain
- Fatigue
- Sleep disturbances

Secondary symptoms:

- Stiffness
- Headache and facial pain
- Abdominal discomfort
- Irritable bladder
- Numbness or tingling
- Chest pain
- Cognitive disorders
- Environmental sensitivity
- Disorientation & balance problems

According to the American College of Rheumatology, fibromyalgia affects three to six million Americans, or about 2 percent of the population.

Possible causes:

While the cause of fibromyalgia is elusive, there are many events which are thought to trigger the onset including viral or bacterial infection, trauma, or autoimmune disease. Theories pertaining to alterations in neurotransmitter regulation, immune system function, sleep physiology, and hormone control are all being studied.

Western treatment:

Common treatments are geared toward improving the quality of sleep and reducing pain. Because deep sleep is so crucial to bodily functions such as tissue repair, antibody production, and regulation of neurotransmitters, hormones, and immune system regulators, the sleep problems that FMS patients suffer from is thought to be a major contributing factor.

Medicines that boost the body's level of serotonin and norepinephrine (neurotransmitters that modulate sleep, pain, and immune system function) are commonly prescribed. While some patients respond well to these drugs, improvement varies from person to person. In addition, the medications may have side effects such as drowsiness, constipation, dry mouth, rash, headache, nervousness, tremors, dizziness, and increased appetite.

Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) like ibuprofen may also be beneficial, though they should not be taken for long periods of time due to potential nephro-toxicity. Narcotic pain relievers, tranquilizers, and cortisone derivatives have been shown to be ineffective and should be avoided because of their potential side effects.

What can Chinese medicine do?

Chinese medicine views fibromyalgia as a condition resulting from general weakness of the liver, kidney, spleen and heart, caused by emotional stress, over strain, lack of adequate sleep and nutrition, and disturbed body rhythm - in other words, the body is out of "sync."

A Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioner completes a full assessment of a patient in order to accurately determine what imbalances are present. There are a number of different patterns that we see frequently with FMS and treatment should be tailored to each patient's pattern. **Acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine can help control pain, increase energy and improve sleep and other symptoms.** Fibromyalgia symptoms are greatly influenced by stress, amount of activity, and environment.

What can you do?

- Eat lightly for dinner, preferably vegetables, grains, and little protein.
- Avoid tomatoes, eggplant, peppers, potatoes, dairy products, red meat, alcohol, caffeine, sugar, and processed or refined foods.
- Take a hot bath before bedtime.
- Practice some form of meditation before bed to relax the body and prepare for sleep.
- Go to sleep at the same time every night, before 11 pm.