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Fibromyalgia Treatment Strategies

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By Camille Noe Pagán

Good news: Your fibromyalgia symptoms can be eased. Here are treatment options to consider.

Fibromyalgia is an increasingly common, complicated, and chronic neuromuscular condition, and treating it can be a challenge. "There are numerous symptoms: fatigue, diffuse pain, depression, inability to sleep, dizziness, and light and sound sensitivity," explains William S. Wilke, MD, a staff member in the Department of Rheumatic and Immunologic Disease at Cleveland Clinic in Ohio. "If you have fibromyalgia, you may experience some — or all — of these symptoms in varying degrees. And because of that complexity, there's no one exact course of treatment."

Fortunately, as physicians and researchers have become more familiar with the subtleties of this disorder, they're now able to offer more effective treatment strategies, including key lifestyle recommendations as well as an array of targeted medications and body therapies.

Whether you have recently been diagnosed or you've been coping with fibromyalgia for some time, the suggestions here can help you manage and minimize your symptoms as well as improve your overall health. To begin:

- **Find a skilled doctor.** Because fibromyalgia is a chronic condition, you will need to work closely, over the long term, with your doctor. And if your primary-care physician isn't experienced in diagnosing and treating fibromyalgia, you may well need to **seek out a specialist experienced in treating fibromyalgia**. Once you've found someone knowledgeable whom you feel comfortable with, start by pinpointing your exact symptoms so that together you can devise the best course of treatment for your particular issues. "I have my patients fill out several questionnaires about their mood, sleep habits, and physical pain levels, which allows me to determine the next steps," says Dr. Wilke.
- **Ask about medical options.** Two medications are currently FDA-approved for fibromyalgia: the antidepressant duloxetine (Cymbalta) and pregabalin (Lyrica), used to ease pain from damaged nerves (neuropathic pain). In clinical trials pregabalin was shown to decrease pain and other symptoms by 30 percent in more than half the people who took it, versus a 15 percent improvement in those who received a placebo. Side effects, including dizziness and sleepiness, typically let up after a few weeks, says Dr. Wilke, who often prescribes a lower dose for daytime use and a higher dose for evening. Physicians typically prescribe other **medications** — including muscle relaxants, antidepressants, analgesics, energizers, and sedatives — to deal with specific symptoms.
- **Increase your activity level.** Even though it may seem counterintuitive, every individual with fibromyalgia can benefit from regular **exercise**. In fact, a groundbreaking 2006 study from the University of Georgia — which reviewed 70 studies and involved more than 6,800 people — found regular exercise consistently increased energy and lowered fatigue in adults of all ages, with varying health conditions, including fibromyalgia. "Exercise stimulates the cardiovascular and central nervous systems and increases endorphins ['feel-good' hormones that are natural pain killers]. This in turn decreases fatigue," explains Jacob Teitelbaum, MD, author of *From Fatigued to Fantastic!* and medical director of the nationwide Fibromyalgia and Fatigue Centers. In addition, "exercise aids weight loss, and having a healthy body weight boosts self-image and decreases wear and tear on the body," says Dr. Wilke. Because it can be tough to exercise when you ache all over and feel exhausted, start slowly with gentle movements, such as walking, swimming, biking, or yoga; aim to work up to at least 30 minutes of activity three times a week.
- **Mind your mood.** "Anxiety and depression can coexist or be symptoms of

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fibromyalgia; both can contribute to fatigue and pain," says Dr. Wilke. Talk to your doctor about how you're feeling; helpful treatments may include cognitive behavioral therapy and/or antidepressants, such as sertraline (Zoloft) or duloxetine (Cymbalta), a medication approved for **sleep quality**).

- **Consider natural remedies.** Research shows that one in four people who suffer from chronic pain also have inadequate levels of vitamin D, an essential nutrient that the body can only manufacture with the assistance of sunlight. Taking a vitamin D supplement (most experts recommend 1,000 IUs daily) and spending at least ten minutes outside every day may help, says Dr. Teitelbaum. Other **supplements** may also ease such symptoms as fatigue, depression, and muscle pain. Dr. Teitelbaum, for instance, has researched D-ribose — a naturally occurring simple sugar that helps create cellular energy in the body — and finds that it aids some people in managing their fibromyalgia symptoms.

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