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Tips for Seniors with Fibromyalgia

by Camille Noe Pagán

Older patients with fibromyalgia have special needs. Here's what you need to know about tailoring treatment accordingly.



Fibromyalgia is a complex disease: Symptoms can vary widely from person to person, so treatments should be tailored to meet each person's needs. People who are 65 and older with fibromyalgia often face an additional layer of complexity, due to physical changes and other health problems that come with age — one reason why customizing fibromyalgia treatment plans is so important.

"Fibromyalgia tends to peak when the person is in their 50s, but symptoms can continue well into the 60s and 70s," says Benjamin H. Natelson, M.D., director of the Pain and Fatigue Study Center at Beth Israel Medical Center in New York City and author of *Your Symptoms Are Real* (Wiley, 2007). "Of course, as a person ages, she may be faced with health problems she didn't have before, and that can have a dramatic impact on how she and her physician approach her fibromyalgia therapy." Seniors are also more likely to develop some of the symptoms associated with fibromyalgia, including depression, anxiety, and sleep disturbances.

In addition to treatments such as gentle exercise, attention to dietary nutrients, and medications for fibromyalgia, here's what seniors should consider:

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- **A "whole health" approach.** "Older fibromyalgia patients tend to have more co-morbidities [co-existing health problems], such as arthritis or Parkinson's disease, than younger patients," says William S. Wilke, M.D., a staff member in the Department of Rheumatic and Immunologic Disease at Cleveland Clinic in Ohio. If you are older, be sure to get a complete physical before beginning fibromyalgia treatment, and if you do have other health problems, tell your specialist about them as well as the medications you're taking to treat them, advises Dr. Wilke. "That can give us clues about your symptoms — some of which may be the result of the other condition, rather than the fibromyalgia — and help us to determine which medications to use or avoid." Adequately treating existing health conditions will help to ensure that symptoms aren't confounded as fibromyalgia symptoms, and that they aren't worsening the fibromyalgia.

- **Exercise (but don't overdo it).** Research shows that mild exercise is one of the most effective treatments for increasing energy in fibromyalgia patients. But older individuals have to be especially careful, says Dr. Natelson. "They may experience more side effects, such as dizziness, from their fibromyalgia medicines. This can make certain workouts — particularly those that require balance or a lot of exertion, such as yoga, aerobics, and running — less possible," he explains. "Or, some people may be in frail health or dealing with disabilities — so telling them to do 30 minutes of exercise is like telling them to climb Mount Everest."

A better option, says Dr. Natelson, is for you to become physically active very gradually and take measures to make sure you're not overexerting yourself. You should feel comfortable, for example, holding a conversation while doing the activity, and it shouldn't cause you any pain. You might start by aiming to walk to the bottom of your driveway and back twice a day. Once you do that for a week or two, you can add

another 30 seconds to a minute to your daily walk, and so on.

- **Emphasis on sleep.** Individuals with fibromyalgia already tend to have difficulties getting restful sleep — and these problems can get worse with age. "Circadian rhythms [natural 24-hour sleep-wake cycles] change as you get older, so many people in their 60s and 70s sleep for shorter periods of time than they used to," says Jacob Teitelbaum, M.D., author of *From Fatigued to Fantastic!* and medical director of the nationwide [Fibromyalgia and Fatigue Centers](#).

There are a number of measures you can take to promote longer, deeper sleep: don't take naps after 4:00 p.m. and limit them to a half an hour; cut back on caffeine; and have protein at dinner or before bedtime to reduce hunger pangs that would otherwise wake you up. Dr. Teitelbaum also advises taking a calcium and magnesium supplement at bedtime, and if your doctor gives you the go-ahead, half a milligram of melatonin, a gentle, naturally occurring hormone that promotes sleep.

- **Good nutrition.** "The elderly tend to eat less, and as a result, have more nutritional deficiencies," says Dr. Teitelbaum. "Many of these deficiencies — such as low magnesium and vitamin D levels — can exacerbate fibromyalgia symptoms." In addition to working with a physician or dietitian to make sure you're getting enough calories from healthful sources, Dr. Teitelbaum says it's wise to take a multivitamin that contains close to 100 percent of the recommended dietary allowance for B vitamins, magnesium and zinc, as well as an additional vitamin D supplement, all of which are well tolerated with fibromyalgia medications.

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