



it's not in your head

Chronic pain, sleepless nights and aching joints? You could be suffering from fibromyalgia says Lisa Hughes

Picture posed by model. Courtesy of Next

Think of the last time you had a really bad flu; the horrible aches and pains, the inability to move, the constant throbbing headache. Now, imagine what it would be like to feel like this on a daily basis, with no explanation and even worse, no cure? For women with fibromyalgia, this is the harsh reality. Controversially labelled the 'Invented Disease', there's the added pressure for sufferers to prove that there's even something wrong with them in the first place and that it isn't all in their heads.

what is fibromyalgia?

Commonly called Fibromyalgia Syndrome or FMS, this condition is characterised by chronic widespread pain. The jury is still out as to what causes FMS, but there's a growing consensus that it's a disorder of the nervous system and not simply a neurosis. Although it isn't a household name yet, it is estimated to affect about 4% of the general population, with adult women at the greatest risk.

the risk factors

sex: Fibromyalgia occurs nine times more often in women than in men.

age: It usually becomes prevalent in mid-adulthood, but can affect any age group, even children.

disturbed sleep: Doctors are undecided as to whether sleeping problems are a cause or effect of this illness, but those with sleep disturbances are deemed to be at higher risk.

family history: Clusters of fibromyalgia in families can also increase your risk.

the symptoms

Symptoms fluctuate from day-to-day and rather than waking up one day and suddenly having the condition, most sufferers experience a gradual onset of symptoms which include:

- chronic, widespread pain
- fatigue
- heightened pain in response to pressure
- difficulty exercising
- headaches
- jaw pain

the causes

The cause of fibromyalgia is currently unknown, but there is much debate about its origins. Often associated with anxiety and stress, fibromyalgia frequently occurs after depression and stress-related disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder. Sleep disturbances are major characteristics (and possible causes) of fibromyalgia. This creates a vicious cycle for sufferers because the problems associated with poor sleep, in turn, accelerate the symptoms.

the treatments

Although there is no cure for fibromyalgia as yet, some treatments have been effective in reducing symptoms. Medications are used to treat pain, improve sleep, and manage depression and anxiety. Some studies suggest that patients respond well to tricyclic anti-depressants which relieve long-term pain and may also help to restore a sleep pattern. Your doctor may also refer you to a physiotherapist, an occupational therapist or a counsellor for further help.

factors which lead to flare-ups include:

- changes in weather
- cold or drafty environments
- hormones (especially premenstrual)
- stress
- depression
- anxiety
- over-exertion

diet

Unfortunately there are no diet rules for coping with fibromyalgia, but there are a few food issues women should be aware of. High numbers of sufferers have difficulty with carbohydrates and benefit from keeping an eye on their intake of carbs. Other possible ones-to-watch for FMS sufferers include: wheat, sugar, alcohol, chocolate, dairy, caffeine, tomatoes, potatoes and citrus fruits. Also, 30% of people with FMS are also hypoglycemic and need to

keep their blood sugars constant. Some researchers believe that a deficiency of magnesium contributes to fibromyalgia symptoms so eating high magnesium foods like almonds help convert food into energy, strengthens the immune system whilst maintaining normal nerve and muscle function. Dieticians also recommend six small meals rather than three big ones. Like all things with fibromyalgia, it's a case of trial and error. Keep a food diary, monitor how you're feeling, and decide what works best for you.

living with fibromyalgia

Having fibromyalgia doesn't have to be the end of the world. Young women who have been diagnosed have actually managed to turn the problem on its head and into a positive. Depending on how much of an impact fibromyalgia has on your life, some women switched careers and subsequently discovered a better work/life balance.

things you can do

- Get into a better sleep pattern. Sleep is essential for keeping FMS at bay.
- Exercise little and often – but don't overdo it! Try light exercise that doesn't put pressure on the joints and muscles.
- Get some sunshine!
- Try medication to manage your pain. Talk to your GP as taking regular paracetamol is usually ineffective.
- Take regular short rests throughout the day – you're not being lazy – listen to your body.
- Apply a hot water bottle or heat pad to aching joints and take regular hot baths.
- Keep stress levels under control – a tip for overall wellbeing.

For more info and an extensive list of possible symptoms and treatments, visit www.fibroireland.com