

## What is fibromyalgia?

Fibromyalgia is a condition that affects the central nervous system (your brain and spinal cord) and the autonomic nervous system (nerve fibres throughout your body that control involuntary processes like digestion and body temperature). Fibromyalgia causes nerve fibres to be more sensitive and more active than usual, which can cause pain, fatigue, problems sleeping, and mood disorders.

## How common is fibromyalgia?

One Canadian study found that about 3.3% of the population had fibromyalgia—4.9% of women and 1.6% of men.

## Who gets fibromyalgia?

Fibromyalgia usually occurs in young or middle-aged women but it can also occur in men, children and teenagers. It affects about three times as many women as men.

## How to prevent fibromyalgia?

The cause of fibromyalgia is often unknown, making it difficult to prevent. However, certain factors may contribute to its development, such as:

- heredity—like many other diseases, fibromyalgia tends to run in families
- physical trauma (such as a motor vehicle accident)
- emotional trauma (such as negative life events or psychological distress)
- poor sleep
- infection (such as Lyme disease)
- autoimmune disorders (such as rheumatoid arthritis, lupus or hypothyroidism)
- repeated exposure to dampness and cold

## What are the signs and symptoms?

The main symptom of fibromyalgia is chronic widespread pain all over the body, accompanied by areas of tenderness. People with fibromyalgia have described the pain as a deep, persistent soreness, or an ache that feels like having the flu. “Tender points” are painful lumps that develop in tight bands of muscle when the muscle contracts and doesn’t fully release. They most commonly occur in the front and back of the neck, the middle to upper back of the shoulders, the upper chest, the elbows, the upper buttocks, the hips and the knees.

Other common symptoms of fibromyalgia include:

- fatigue
- sleep disturbances (including insomnia, frequent waking during the night, and lack of restorative “deep” sleep)
- joint pain
- headaches
- stiffness

Some people also experience memory or concentration problems, leg cramps, nervousness or depression.



## How is the disease diagnosed?

The diagnosis of fibromyalgia is usually based on the pattern and location of the pain, as well as the presence of tender points. To detect tender points, doctors firmly press specific areas of the body to determine whether the person feels pain in that spot.

Doctors may also do blood tests to make sure that another condition isn't causing the symptoms.

## How is fibromyalgia treated?

Fibromyalgia can be treated with both medications and lifestyle changes. Specific medications can be used to treat the pain associated with fibromyalgia and its other symptoms.

Lifestyle and behaviour changes can also help with fibromyalgia pain. Try:

- avoiding noisy environments
- dressing warmly in cold temperatures
- soaking in a hot tub or using heating pads
- gently massaging the sore area
- stretching affected muscles gently (hold the stretch for about 30 seconds and repeat it 5 times)
- slowing down and conserving energy
- learning techniques for relaxation and stress reduction
- improving sleep by avoiding stimulants in the evening and sleeping in a quiet, dark room
- doing aerobic exercises to improve physical conditioning

Reducing the level of pain can itself help reduce sleep problems, fatigue, concentration difficulties and anxiety.

## Living with fibromyalgia

You can make sure your treatment is as effective as possible by talking openly to your doctor and participating in decisions about your treatment. Learn about fibromyalgia and what you can do to help manage your symptoms.

If you are taking medications for your fibromyalgia symptoms, be careful to follow your doctor's and pharmacist's instructions. Take your medications at the same time every day, and try to develop a routine that will help you remember to take them.



## Resources

### Patient Associations

- [ACTION Atlantic For People with Chronic Pain](#)
- [Canadian Pain Coalition](#)
- [Chronic Pain Association of Canada](#)
- [Association Québécoise de la Douleur Chronique \(AQDC\) \[French only\]](#)
- [Association Québécoise de la Fibromyalgie \[French only\]](#)

### Congresses

- [The Canadian Arthritis Network](#)
- [Canadian Pain Society](#)
- [Canadian Institute for the Relief of Pain and Disability](#)

### Other site(s)

- [The Arthritis Society](#)
- [Canadian Pain Coalition](#)