

EXERCISE AND FIBROMYALGIA

Fibromyalgia is a debilitating condition affecting between 1 and 3% of the general population. The syndrome is characterized by widespread muscle aches and pains, stiffness, fatigue and muscle spasms. Many people with fibromyalgia report difficulty doing everyday activities such as carrying objects, walking and working with their arms. Pain, fatigue, helplessness, psychological distress and difficulty coping with stresses plague many people with the condition. No one knows what causes fibromyalgia, but it is thought to be a combination of increased sensitivity to pain and environmental and psychological factors.

Can exercise help?

Common sense suggests that individuals with fibromyalgia shouldn't exercise. And many people limit physical activity out of fear that it will make their symptoms worse. But in reality, if you have fibromyalgia, you can't afford to not exercise.

Properly done exercise interrupts the downhill spiral of muscular and cardiovascular deconditioning and the resulting loss of function. Deconditioning leads to increased muscle soreness after even minimal amounts of physical activity. Additionally, many individuals have postural imbalances, tight muscles and poor range of motion, all of which place more strain on the body and movement.

A program including consistent aerobic exercise improves function, symptoms and well-being. And strength training improves muscle strength and reduces exercise-related pain and exercise-induced muscle fatigue. Overall, an exercise program can help to alleviate many of the physically and emotionally painful symptoms of fibromyalgia.

Exercising Safely With Fibromyalgia

Prior to increasing physical activity, discuss your plans with your physician. Then an ACE-certified Advanced Health & Fitness Specialist can assist you in developing your activity program and guide your rate of progression.

Because postural imbalances and tight, inflexible muscles are common in individuals with fibromyalgia, every activity session should begin and end with mobility (flexibility and range-of-motion) activities. These exercises should be done slowly, emphasizing quality of movement, and never be painful.

Once you are able to perform these basic exercises comfortably, add strength training two to three times a week using light weights. The emphasis is not on quantity, but rather on the 'quality' of muscle movement. Using too much resistance and/or doing the movements improperly can make you prone to muscular microtrauma, which leads to muscle soreness and can potentially worsen your symptoms.

Aerobic exercise should also be on your exercise plan. Warm water provides an optimal medium for beginning your exercise program. Many communities have facilities that offer warm-water exercise sessions for people with arthritis and these classes are ideal starting points for those with fibromyalgia as well. Walking is also an excellent activity. Other types of exercises, such as cycling, stairstepping and using other popular machines found in fitness facilities, may increase symptoms if you don't maintain correct posture. Aerobic activities should be undertaken at a moderate intensity a

minimum of three times per week. Start with just a few minutes and gradually increase duration to build up to 20 to 40 minutes of activity each day.

The key to exercise success for individuals with fibromyalgia is consistency. When you experience flare-ups, back off or take a day off. Resume your physical-activity program as soon as you feel better.

With appropriate mobility exercises, strength training and aerobic conditioning, you can expect to see improvement in your functional status and overall outlook on life.

Brad A. Roy, Ph.D., F.A.C.S.M., the director of The Summit, Kalispell Regional Medical Center's facility for health promotion and fitness in Kalispell, Montana, provided exercise recommendations for this educational handout.

Additional Resources

American Academy of Family Physicians—Fibromyalgia and Exercise: www.familydoctor.org/online/famdocen/home/common/pain/treatment/061.html

Medline Plus—Fibromyalgia: www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/fibromyalgia.html

Mayo Clinic—Fibromyalgia: www.mayoclinic.com/health/fibromyalgia/DS00079

If you are interested in information on other health and fitness topics, contact: American Council on Exercise, 4851 Paramount Drive, San Diego, CA 92123, 800-825-3636; or, go online at www.acefitness.org/GetFit and access the complete list of ACE Fit Facts.™



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