

## CU SPORTS MEDICINE

# Fibromyalgia

### What is fibromyalgia?

Fibromyalgia is a puzzling condition, but we're learning more about it all the time.

- The most common symptoms are widespread muscle and joint pain accompanied by tender points and stiffness.
- You may also experience excessive fatigue, unrestful sleep, tension headaches or migraines, bladder or bowel problems, anxiety, or depression.
- Fibromyalgia is 5 to 10 times more common in women than in men. It usually occurs between the ages of 30 to 50 years, although anyone can be affected.

Fibromyalgia is not life-threatening. A person often experiences periods of relief or significant improvement of symptoms. There are many strategies for reducing pain and promoting normal function. Ask your doctor about various treatment options including medications, heat (hot showers, hot tubs, heat packs, etc.), physical therapy, relaxation techniques, mild massage, and acupuncture.

### What about exercise?

Individuals with fibromyalgia often reduce their levels of physical activity in an attempt to avoid pain. Unfortunately, this results in lower levels of stamina, strength, and flexibility. If you don't stay active, you'll get caught in a cycle of increasing stiffness, weakness, and fatigue. Keep moving! Maintain your physical fitness and you'll be able to perform daily activities or recreational pursuits with more ease and energy. Exercise may also improve your quality of sleep, reduce depression, and lift your spirits.

#### *Aerobic Exercise*

Activities such as walking, swimming, and cycling promote cardiovascular fitness and improve blood flow to muscles and joints. Some studies also show that aerobic activity can also significantly improve the pain threshold of tender points. However, ***you should be careful to increase both the intensity and duration of exercise slowly.***

When beginning an exercise program, start with a small amount of exercise. You may experience slightly higher levels of fatigue than normal, but hang in there. Find an activity that you enjoy and can fit into your daily schedule. For example, start with a 5 minute walk and increase the amount of exercise by 1 to 2 minutes each week. Build up to 30 to 40 minutes, 3 to 5 days each week.

One study found that walking 10 three-minute intervals on the treadmill at a comfortable pace (separated by a 3 minute recovery period) made it possible to exercise without making symptoms worse. Once you reach this goal at an easy intensity, begin to challenge yourself by exercising at a more brisk pace. All of us have good and bad days. Don't be hard on yourself during difficult periods. Just do as much as you can.

### *Flexibility Exercises*

Flexibility exercises help maintain normal range of motion. If you limit your movements, you'll become stiff. Then you start having trouble with daily activities like hooking your bra, putting on pantyhose, or reaching up to a high shelf. Gentle stretching exercises will help you to move smoothly.

### *Strength Training*

Strength training may be done very gently and gradually. Focus on strength exercises that protect your ability to perform daily activities:

- partial squat or leg press = getting up off the couch
- biceps curl = lifting groceries
- wall push-up or arm press = pushing a heavy door

***Use light weights and avoid painful movements.*** An exercise professional can help you design an individualized program.

### **What about nutrition?**

- You can increase your energy levels and experience restful sleep by reducing your intake of caffeine, alcohol, high sugar foods, and nicotine. You should be especially careful to avoid these items 4 to 5 hours before bedtime as they interfere with normal sleep patterns.
- Recent studies suggest that there may be a connection between fibromyalgia and vitamin D deficiency. Please be sure you have an adequate calcium and vitamin D intake. Discuss the need for a blood test to check your vitamin D level with your doctor or health care provider.
- If you experience swelling, you may want to reduce your sodium intake.
- Eat a well-balanced, nutritious diet. This will provide you with the energy, vitamins, and other nutrients your body needs.