

Fibromyalgia

Condition: Fibromyalgia is a condition characterized by widespread pain and tenderness to the touch and is often associated with fatigue, sleep problems, depression, anxiety, and memory problems.

Background: The cause of fibromyalgia is unknown, although genetic, psychological, infection, and trauma causes have been suggested. Researchers believe that the pain is caused by changes in the brain that cause the person to be more sensitive to pain.

Risk Factors: Fibromyalgia is more common among women than men. The average age of onset is between ages 30 and 50, with the most cases occurring in women aged 55 to 64. Lower educational level, lower household income, being divorced, and disability are other factors associated with increased risk for fibromyalgia.

History and Symptoms: The onset and presentation of fibromyalgia is variable. Widespread pain, fatigue, mental fog, and depression are commonly identified.

Physical Exam: A physician will perform a physical exam to identify the locations of pain on both sides of the body (left and right) as well as above and below the waist. Assessment of the severity of the pain using a pain scale as well as psychological assessments may also be used. Physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R) physicians are trained at performing these types of detailed history, neurological, and musculoskeletal examinations that are critical in properly assessing for fibromyalgia.

Diagnostic Process: A diagnosis of fibromyalgia is based on the following criteria: widespread pain, persistence of the severe symptoms for at least 3 months, and the absence of any other identifiable disorder or disease that would explain the pain. As fibromyalgia symptoms overlap with other conditions, a full laboratory work-up is helpful to rule out other conditions.

Rehab Management: Fibromyalgia is thought to be incurable, although active rehabilitation results in the best management of symptoms and improvement of quality of life. Treatments include medications (for sleep interference, fatigue, depression, and pain), physical rehabilitation, psychological interventions, and education. Aerobic exercise and strength training have been found to reduce symptoms. PM&R physicians are trained to formulate and oversee the proper course of therapy needed to manage fibromyalgia.

Other Resources for Patients and Families: Patients and families should receive education about patient-directed symptom control and about the importance of family support. Organizations focused on fibromyalgia or chronic pain are available to offer support for patients and families.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is PM&R?

Physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R), also known as physiatry, is a primary medical specialty that aims to enhance and restore functional ability and improve quality of life to those with injuries, physical impairments or disabilities affecting the brain, spinal cord, nerves, bones, joints, ligaments, muscles and tendons. PM&R physicians, known as physiatrists, evaluate and treat the whole body, maximize patients' independence in their daily life and are experts in designing comprehensive, patient-centered treatment plans to empower patients to achieve their goals. By taking the whole body into account, they can accurately pin-point problems, decrease pain, assist in recovery from devastating injuries and maximize overall outcomes and performance with non-surgical and peri-surgical options. To learn more, visit www.aapmr.org/aboutpmr.

What makes PM&R physicians unique?

PM&R physicians' training focuses not just on treating medical conditions, but on enhancing the patient's performance and quality of life in the context of those medical conditions. They focus not only on one part of the body, but instead on the development of a comprehensive program for putting the pieces of a person's life back together – medically, socially, emotionally and vocationally – after injury or disease. PM&R physicians make and manage medical diagnoses, design a treatment plan and prescribe the therapies that physical therapists or other allied therapists perform or that are carried out by the patients themselves. By providing an appropriate treatment plan, PM&R physicians help patients stay as active as possible at any age. Their broad medical expertise allows them to treat disabling conditions throughout a person's lifetime.

Why see a PM&R physician?

A PM&R physician will thoroughly assess your condition, needs, and expectations and rule out any serious medical illnesses to develop a treatment plan. By understanding your condition and goals, you and your PM&R physician can develop a treatment plan suited to your unique needs.

How do I find a PM&R physician near me?

Visit www.aapmr.org/findapmrphysician or contact your primary care physician for a referral.