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## Fibromyalgia

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An estimated five million Americans age 18 or older are affected by fibromyalgia – a chronic condition causing pain in muscles, ligaments and tendons, as well as fatigue and multiple tender points. Tender points are specific places on the body where people with fibromyalgia feel pain from even the slightest pressure. These places include but are not limited to the neck, shoulders, back and hips.

Between 80 and 90 percent of those diagnosed with fibromyalgia are women; however, anyone can be affected. Most people are diagnosed during middle age, although the symptoms often become present earlier in life. Although fibromyalgia is often considered an arthritis-related condition, it is not truly a form of arthritis because it does not cause inflammation or damage to joints or muscles.

Signs and symptoms of fibromyalgia can vary, depending on the weather, stress, physical activity or even the time of day. The pain associated with fibromyalgia is described as a constant dull ache, typically arising from muscles. Scientists do not know what causes fibromyalgia, but it most likely involves a variety of factors working together. Fibromyalgia is not progressive and generally does not lead to other conditions or diseases. It can, however, lead to pain, depression and lack of sleep. These problems can then interfere with your ability to function at home or at work as well as maintain close family or personal relationships.

Because many of the signs and symptoms of fibromyalgia are similar to other disorders, you may see several health providers before receiving a diagnosis. Your general physician may refer you to a specialist in the treatment of arthritis and other inflammatory conditions. The American College of Rheumatology has established two criteria for the diagnosis of fibromyalgia:

Widespread pain lasting at least three months

At least 11 of 18 positive tender points

Risk factors for fibromyalgia include, but are not limited to

Gender – fibromyalgia occurs more often in women than men.

Age – fibromyalgia tends to develop during early and middle adulthood.

Sleep Disorders – persons who have leg muscle spasms at night, restless legs syndrome or sleep apnea often have fibromyalgia.

Family History – persons who have a relative with fibromyalgia may be more likely to develop it.

Rheumatic Disorder – persons with rheumatoid arthritis, lupus or other similar disorders may be more likely to develop fibromyalgia.

Medications may help reduce the pain of fibromyalgia and improve sleep. The Food and Drug Administration has approved a medication to treat fibromyalgia. Your health provider may also treat you with other forms of medications, such as pain relievers. Exercise may help restore muscle balance and may reduce pain. Stretching techniques and the application of hot or cold also may help. Ask your health provider about his or her recommendation for physical therapy to help with your fibromyalgia.

Several alternative treatments may help relieve stress and reduce pain; however, these treatments are somewhat unproven because they have not been studied thoroughly. Talk to your health provider about the risks and benefits of these therapies, including but not limited to Acupuncture, Chiropractic Therapy and Massage Therapy.

Behavioral therapy may help strengthen your belief in your abilities and teach methods for dealing with stressful situations. Self-care is critical in the management of fibromyalgia. Some key factors in self-care may include, but are not limited to Stress Reduction. Give yourself time each day to relax. Try stress management techniques, such as deep-breathing exercises or meditation.

Sleep. Sleep is essential. In addition to getting enough sleep, try going to bed and getting up at the same time each day and limit napping.

Exercise. Talk to your health provider or a physical therapist about an exercise program. Exercises may include walking, biking and water aerobics.

Take Your Time. Keep activity on an even level. If you do too much on your good days, you may have more bad days. However, those that drop all activity tend to do worse than those who remain active. Do something that you find enjoyable and fulfilling every day.

Healthy Lifestyle. Vary your diet with lean meats, fish, fruits and vegetables. Also, limit your caffeine intake as this may cause sleep problems.

In addition to having to deal with pain and fatigue, you may have to deal with the frustration of having a condition that is often misunderstood. Educate yourself, your family, friends and co-workers about your condition. Several groups, including The Arthritis Foundation and the American Chronic Pain Association, among others, provide educational classes and support groups. Support groups may provide help and advice that you might not find anywhere else. They may also be able to put you in touch with others who have had similar experiences and understand what you are experiencing.

For more information, contact your County Extension Agent at 903/473-5000, ext. 157. You may also find information through the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases, a division of the National Institutes of Health: <http://www.niams.nih.gov>.

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