

Fibromyalgia and Exercise: Yes, You Can

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Exercise eases the pain of fibromyalgia. Getting started may not be easy, but it's worth it.

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Take it from a Cincinnati, Ohio, mother of six, Pat Holthaun: Exercise may be the last thing you feel like doing if you have fibromyalgia, but it's also one of the best things you can do to decrease pain.

Like many people, when Holthaun was diagnosed with the widespread pain disorder several years ago, she took up residence on her couch -- unwilling to even think about getting up and moving. But two years ago, the 72-year-old finally decided to take her doctor's advice and enrol in a warm water aerobics class.

"I just love it," she says. "It's such an enjoyable thing, and I am so much more limber and stronger now." She likes it so much; she now does water aerobics three times a week.

Holthaun is on to something. Along with medication and education about fibromyalgia, exercise plays a critical role in managing the disease.

Fibromyalgia and Exercise: Slow and Steady

"Exercise improves a person's overall sense of well-being and reduces pain and tenderness over time," says Lesley M. Arnold, M.D. a psychiatrist and fibromyalgia expert at the University Of Cincinnati College Of Medicine in Ohio. "We try to pace it slowly and make sure that their symptoms of pain and fatigue are under control before we introduce it."

The first step is typically an assessment of the person's current fitness level. "We like to start them on a program that is a level or two below their current level, improve their stamina, and build up to 20 to 30 minutes of moderate aerobic activity on most days of the week," Arnold tells WebMD. "We really encourage them to pace things and set reasonable goals."

Water Aerobics Soothe and Strengthen

For people with fibromyalgia, low-impact aerobics is the way to go. "We really like an aerobic water class and people tend to go back," Arnold says.

The research backs her up. A study in *Arthritis Research & Therapy* found that water aerobics improve health-related quality of life in women with fibromyalgia.

These classes often start in warm-water pools, which can be soothing. What's more, they are

typically group-based, so people can garner support and motivation from other members of the group. Holthaus says that this helps people stick to a program. "People with fibromyalgia tend to isolate, but being in a group helps motivation," she says.

Should You Exercise?

People with fibromyalgia get the same health benefits from exercise as other people -- and more. Regular exercise combats fatigue and increases your energy. It makes your joints more flexible and improves sleep and mood. Exercise frees people with fibromyalgia to live a fuller life. Talk to your doctor before you begin exercising. Some exercises may not be recommended for patients and could be harmful.

Strength Training and Low-Impact Exercise

What if you don't have access to a pool? Don't despair: Walking, biking, and other forms of low-impact aerobic activity also provide benefits. "Grab a buddy, take a class, or look into physical therapy," Arnold suggests.

And don't rule out strength training. Although doctors once believed that strength training could worsen pain in people with fibromyalgia, new research suggests that this is not the case. In fact, the latest research -- presented at the 2008 annual meeting of the American Society of Anaesthesiologists in Orlando -- suggests that strength training can have the same ameliorating effect on pain as aerobic exercise.

Lynne Matallana, president and founder of the National Fibromyalgia Association in Anaheim, Calif., says the benefits of exercise for people with the condition are tremendous. "This has been shown scientifically and anecdotally," she says.

Matallana's own experience has shown her that exercise can also soothe the mind. A former dancer, she was diagnosed with fibromyalgia in 1995. "I have watched how exercise has improved my symptoms and my overall outlook," she says. "When I got in water, I could do movements that were almost like dance. That touched my soul again."

Getting Over the Mental Hurdles

Let's face it: It may hurt just to think about going from couch potato to marathon runner. To avoid getting overwhelmed, take it in stages.

"If you have fibromyalgia, you have this amplified pain signal telling you that something is wrong," Matallana says. "It's a natural instinct to want to protect your body by going to bed, but that actually makes pain worse."

Try these two tips to get your mind on board:

Give yourself a pep talk. "Tell yourself that this is going to be beneficial," Matallana says. "Say, 'Today I will do just this amount because I know this will help me feel better.'"

Set realistic goals. Arnold often prescribes five minutes of walking to start. "People may think that

won't be too difficult, but it can be if you have fibromyalgia," she says. "We start very slow and build up from there, and emphasize that there is no hurry."

From Sceptic to Believer

In the beginning, Mattalana scoffed at the thought of doing only three minutes on the treadmill, but it wasn't as easy as she thought it would be. "I slowly got my body conditioned and got to a point where I could add more exercise," she says. "It is a slow process, but every time you get up, stretch, walk, get into a pool, or take a yoga class, you are one step closer to feeling better."

"Once you convince people to start exercising, they become believers," says Daniel J. Clauw, MD, professor of anaesthesiology and medicine at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. "It's not until they do it and see how much it helps that they embrace it."

How long does that usually take? "Some people will notice changes right away, but for others, it may take a couple of weeks," he says.

Exercise is not a panacea for fibromyalgia, Clauw says. But, he says, "it works in more people than anything else. I can't remember an instance where someone got into an exercise program and didn't notice a significant improvement in symptoms."

SOURCES:

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Pat Holthaun, Cincinnati, Ohio.

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Lynne Matallana, president and founder, National Fibromyalgia Association, Anaheim, Calif.

Daniel J. Clauw, MD, professor of anesthesiology and medicine, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

Exercise Should Reduce Your Pain – Fibromyalgia Exercises At Home

Will exercise make you hurt more? Some muscle soreness is common after exercising in the beginning. But ultimately exercise should relieve fibromyalgia pain, not aggravate it. Try these tips: Start off small and build slowly. Massage or apply heat to sore muscles before exercise and apply cold after.

Personalize Your Exercise Program

People with fibro often give up on exercise because they fall into a "push-crash" cycle. They push themselves too hard, get injured, and then stop. To avoid this cycle, work with your doctor or a physical therapist to design a program around what you can do. Build in rest days. Most importantly, listen to your body: Move less or slower, or use smaller motions when necessary.

Start With Aerobic Exercise

What's better for fibromyalgia symptoms -- aerobic or relaxation exercises? A 2002 study found aerobics to be far superior -- even in people with severe fibromyalgia. Start your exercise program with a low-impact cardiovascular exercise such as walking. If walking creates too much stress on your muscles or joints, try non-weight-bearing activities like swimming or bicycling.

Ready, Set, Walk

Walking can help control your pain and fatigue. Start by walking as little as five minutes a day and add 30 seconds or a minute each day if you can. Work up to 30 minutes to an hour of walking, three to four times a week. If you start to struggle, walk for a comfortable length of time for several days before increasing again. If you want a more intense workout, try alternating walking with slow jogging.

Curl Up Into a Pose

Just can't drag yourself out of the house some days? Then do yoga poses at home. Yoga's combination of stretching and meditation seems to ease multiple fibro symptoms including poor sleep, anxiety, and depression. Seated yoga positions can be practiced on a chair or the floor. Or try a restorative pose: Lie on the floor with your legs extended straight up a wall.

Take the Plunge

Hit the neighbourhood pool even if you don't know how to swim. Water is easy on the joints, it relaxes muscles, and it allows you to stretch more. If you can't swim, find an aquatics class that includes gentle range of motion, flexibility, strengthening, and aerobic exercises. Warm water in particular (around 88 degrees) may help relax muscles more. Look for a gym or clinic with a warm-water pool or hot tub.

Strengthen Your Muscles

People with fibromyalgia were once discouraged from doing strength training. But research has shown that it's safe and helpful. Strengthening muscles makes daily activities such as climbing stairs and doing household chores easier. Use props like resistance bands or free weights. To strengthen calves, rise up on your toes as high as you can and slowly lower yourself back down. Hold weights during your reps.

Stretch for Flexibility

Can you move all your joints through their full range of motion? Many people with fibromyalgia can't. Range-of-motion exercises gently reduce stiffness and keep your joints flexible, making movement easier during your daily routine. You might start with simple motions such as rotating your arms and legs as you sit in a chair. Your doctor or a physical therapist can help you identify the right exercises for you.

Every Little Bit Helps

Maybe the idea of exercise still seems overwhelming. Or maybe you're already in an exercise program. You can still try to add little bits of physical activity to your daily routine. Walk up the escalator. Move the remote so you have to get up to change the TV channel. Push the baby stroller when you go for a walk. Little challenges like these shouldn't worsen symptoms but should improve pain and fatigue.

Stay Psyched to Move

Exercising consistently helps you get the most out of your program. But fibro symptoms can dampen your motivation. To stay inspired, exercise with a friend or a fibro support group in your area. Set small goals for yourself. And when you reach your goals, reward yourself with a massage, a movie, or extra reading time. Above all, keep your eyes on the prize: feeling your best, even with fibromyalgia.

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