



Orthopedic Associates OF PORT HURON

Fibromyalgia – Diagnosis & Treatment

Fibromyalgia syndrome affects between 3 and 6 million people in the United States. A majority are women between the ages of 30 and 50. Its characteristics are widespread soft tissue pain combined with a low pain threshold most commonly manifested at anatomically defined musculoskeletal structures, which are referred to as “tender points”. It accounts for 20% of visits to rheumatologists.

Patients with Fibromyalgia commonly have many associated symptoms. These include inability to sleep, fatigue, headaches, cognitive difficulties, irritable bowel symptoms, and dysesthesias in the extremities. The result is a tremendous decline in self-esteem and functional ability. The persistent pain accompanied by chronic fatigue prevents patients from achieving their full potential at work and home. Social isolation and deterioration of family relationships are not uncommon.

There are numerous instances in which fibromyalgia is closely associated with many other medical entities. Metabolic diseases such as hypothyroidism, infectious diseases, symptoms of opiate or steroid medication withdrawal, bacteremia or viremia, and HIV are all associated with a higher than normal incidence of fibromyalgia. It is hypothesized that many of these patients had subclinical fibromyalgia that subsequently became symptomatic as their pain threshold was lessened by a concurrent medical condition.

A typical patient with fibromyalgia complains of generalized pain in areas near joints as well as in the cervical and lumbar area. Pain is described as aching or burning, and pressure is commonly mentioned. Subjective complaints of severe unrelenting fatigue and morning stiffness are numerous. The physical examination of fibromyalgia very frequently will reveal muscle spasm. However, in many cases there is no associated muscle spasm but one does find the soft tissue “tender points” that are a significant sign of this disorder. If a careful examination is not made, the diagnosis is easily missed.

Central to the diagnosis of fibromyalgia is the presence of tender points. In 1990, the American College of Rheumatology published criteria for the classification of fibromyalgia. The typical areas are the lateral epicondyle, trapezius region, supraspinatus origin, occipital area, lower cervical area, costochondral junction,

buttocks, greater trochanter, and the medial aspect of the knee. A diagnosis of fibromyalgia can generally be made by finding two cardinal features: the presence of soft tissue points in at least 11 of 18 defined anatomical sites, and the subjective complaint of widespread and persistent musculoskeletal pain.

The treatment of both fibromyalgia and myofascial pain syndrome is multifactorial. Non-narcotic analgesics in the form of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs are indicated. Muscle relaxants are helpful in the patient with palpable spasm on physical examination or may also be utilized as an aid for patients who have difficulty sleeping at night due to muscle pain. The use of narcotic medication is not indicated.

Amitriptyline is effective in approximately 25% to 45% of patients with fibromyalgia. In many cases, patients discontinue this medication because of the secondary negative side effects associated with tricyclic antidepressants. Additional antidepressant medications, such as the selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRI) are being used more frequently. They appear to have less severe side effects than the tricyclic antidepressants and are better tolerated.

A treatment goal of fibromyalgia is to reduce muscle irritability and spasm and reestablish normal cervical or lumbar lordosis. Muscles that have been in a tightened contracted condition for long periods of time must be stretched and mobilized in order to return to their normal state.

Physical Therapy is a critical factor. This means hands-on "manual" therapy as opposed to the sole utilization of passive modalities. Hot packs, massage, and ultrasound may feel good, but are not very effective. These modalities must be combined with "soft tissue mobilization" and an organized program of stretching and strengthening exercises.

Needling of trigger points with xylocaine or lidocaine with or without a small amount of steroid has been found to be quite effective. A very effective technique is to inject the trigger points or tender points and then immediately send the patient to physical therapy while the anesthetic is still effective. This will enable the physical therapist to achieve more in the form of stretching the muscles out to length. It is by utilizing a team approach such as this that these patients can be returned to a functional lifestyle. Another important aspect of the physical therapy regimen is education, and home exercise instruction so the patient may follow an organized program at home.

Acupuncture has been increasingly utilized as a therapeutic modality for soft tissue pain syndromes. It is far from universally effective and therefore controversial. Electro-acupuncture is a technique in which the needles are stimulated electrically. The clinical improvement noted following a course of acupuncture treatment may also be secondary to an elevation of endorphin

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levels that is known to accompany this type of therapy. Studies by Sprott et al reveal that acupuncture treatment of patients with fibromyalgia was associated with decreased pain levels and fewer tender points. There was also an increase in serotonin levels in serum. The preliminary results of this study were thought to be objective parameters for acupuncture efficacy in patients with fibromyalgia.

All patients benefit from education and reassurance that fibromyalgia is not a deforming or crippling condition. In this regard, support groups are extremely helpful as those suffering from the disease process are able to see and speak with others who have recovered and returned to functional and normal lives. In many cases, they will hear that a return to normal function only followed a return to gainful employment and the psychological benefits that resulted there from.

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