Fibromyalgia

What is fibromyalgia?
Fibromyalgia is a condition that causes pain all over the body. It is estimated that fibromyalgia affects nearly 1 in 20 people across the globe. Anyone can develop fibromyalgia, although the condition affects more women than men. In most cases, fibromyalgia occurs between 30 and 60 years of age but can develop in people of any age, including children and the elderly. There are usually tender points in certain areas of the body. These points help the doctor to make a diagnosis.

What are the causes?
The exact cause of fibromyalgia is unknown. Research into people with fibromyalgia has identified a number of changes in the way that their body functions. However, what causes these changes in the first place, and how exactly these cause fibromyalgia, is still not clear.

Symptoms of fibromyalgia
There are many symptoms of fibromyalgia and they tend to vary from person to person. The symptoms can also come and go over time, although it is unlikely they will ever disappear altogether.

The main symptoms of fibromyalgia include:
- pain
- extreme sensitivity
- stiffness
- fatigue
- poor quality sleep
- cognitive problems
- headaches
- Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)

Other symptoms can include:
- not being able to regulate your body temperature (feeling too hot or too cold)
- restless legs
- anxiety
- depression

How is it treated?

Exercise
As fatigue is one of the main symptoms of fibromyalgia, you may find you
often feel unable to exercise. However, an exercise programme that is specially suited to your condition can help to manage your symptoms, as well as improve your overall health.

Your exercise programme should be a mix of:

- aerobic exercise - including walking, cycling or swimming. Aerobic exercise helps to reduce fatigue and improve blood flow to muscles and joints,
- muscle stretches to improve flexibility. It is best to take advice from a physiotherapist about which exercise will suit you best.

When you start exercising it is normal to feel tired initially. This will improve if you slowly build up the amount of exercise you do.

**Pacing yourself**
Pacing involves balancing periods of activity with periods of rest. It means not overdoing it or pushing yourself beyond your limits. This is especially important when starting to exercise.

**Other treatment options available:**

- medication – speak to you GP about suitable medication for you
- hydrotherapy – swimming, sitting or exercising in a heated pool
- cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) – a talking therapy that helps you deal with problems positively
- use of relaxation techniques
- alternative therapies such as acupuncture

**Physiotherapy**
You may benefit from seeing a physiotherapist to help improve your posture and get advice on stretches to help relax muscles and on how to become more active.

**Information and support**
You may also find it helpful to research fibromyalgia to improve your understanding of the condition. Many people with fibromyalgia find that support groups provide an important network where they can talk to other people living with the condition. Two useful sites are listed below:

**FibroAction**
http://www.fibroaction.org/Default.aspx

**Fibromyalgia Association UK**
http://www.fibromyalgia-associationuk.org/