

## What is fibromyalgia? <sup>[1]</sup>

Dear Alice,

What is "fibromyalgia"? Heck, I'm not even sure of the spelling, but that's it phonetically, anyway. Thanks.

### Answer

Dear Reader,

Fibromyalgia, formerly thought of as an imaginary or psychosomatic condition, is, in fact, a chronic illness. While it most often affects women in their mid-thirties to late-fifties, it also affects men and children. The American College of Rheumatology (ACR) <sup>[2]</sup> estimates that the condition affects between two to four percent of the United States population. It causes fatigue, pain in the muscles and ligaments (not the joints), and a number of tender spots on the body, where even a small bit of pressure causes pain. This pain is commonly felt in the neck, upper and lower back, hips, elbows, and knees. Beyond these symptoms, fibromyalgia shows itself in a number of other ways, including:

- Stiffness, especially in the morning
- Problems sleeping
- Increased sensitivity to pain
- Headaches, including migraines
- Facial pain
- Irritable bowel syndrome
- Chest pain
- Painful menstrual periods
- Skin numbness (paresthesias)
- Frequent and urgent urination
- Problems with concentrating and memory (commonly referred to as "fibro fog")

The exact cause of fibromyalgia is unknown, but researchers believe a number of factors may contribute to the illness. One theory, referred to as "central sensitization" holds that people with fibromyalgia have a lower pain threshold due to increased sensitivity to pain signals in the brain. This sensitivity may be linked to elevated levels of Substance P, a chemical found in spinal fluid

that communicates pain signals with the brain. Another theory involves chemical changes in the brain resulting in low levels of serotonin, a neurotransmitter linked to pain, sleep, and depression. Other possible causes or triggers include lack of deep sleep, injury or trauma that affects the central nervous system, certain infections, problems with the sympathetic nervous system, changes in muscle metabolism, hormonal changes, and physical or psychological stress.

Because this condition may impact different areas of the body and a person's life, several types of treatments are typically recommended. Antidepressants, anti-seizure medications, and even over-the-counter medications may help relieve symptoms. That being said, self-care is also a critical aspect of dealing with fibromyalgia. Those with it may want to try a yoga class, go for a bike ride, or walk around the neighborhood to slow down, boost activity level, and reduce stress. Getting more sleep can prove to be beneficial as well. Incorporating alternative therapies such as massage, Tai Chi, and acupuncture can help provide both stress and pain relief for people living with fibromyalgia.

Not only does fibromyalgia impact patients physically, but it may make them more prone to mental health concerns including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. The psychological impact and social burden around feeling guilty for complaining about their condition or fear that loved ones won't believe them can exacerbate patients' physical pain and complicate their relationships at home and at work. Fibromyalgia treatment programs that promote social support and emotional coping skills can help patients manage the physical and emotional challenges of their condition.

If you've been diagnosed with or believe that you have fibromyalgia, you may want to seek treatment from a health care provider familiar with fibromyalgia. Because it can present symptoms that are similar to other diseases, ensuring that you have the correct diagnosis will not only provide you with peace of mind, but also help ensure you are receiving the most appropriate treatments.

Here's to some clarity on a commonly misunderstood condition.

Alice!

Category:

[General Health](#) [3]

[Aches, Pains & Other Ailments](#) [4]

[Chronic Conditions](#) [5]

## **Related questions**

[Snap, crackle, pop — Scoliosis and back cracking](#) [6]

[Tingling fingers?](#) [7]

[Health benefits of yoga](#) [8]

## **Resources**

[Medical Services \(Morningside\)](#) [9]

[Counseling and Psychological Services \(CPS\) \(Morningside\)](#) [10]

[Medical Services \(CUIMC\)](#) [11]

Mental Health Services (CUIMC) <sup>[12]</sup>

Published date:

Sep 06, 1996

Last reviewed on:

Oct 27, 2017

## Footer menu

- ▼ Contact Alice!
  - Content Use
  - Media Inquiries
  - Comments & Corrections
- ▼ Syndication & Licensing
  - Licensing Q&As
  - Get Alice! on Your Website
  - Full Site Syndication
  - Link to Go Ask Alice!

**Go Ask Alice! is not an emergency or instant response service.**

If you are in an urgent situation, please visit our Emergency page to view a list of 24 hour support services and hotlines.

---

**Source URL:** <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/what-fibromyalgia-0>

### Links

[1] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/what-fibromyalgia-0>

[2] [http://www.rheumatology.org/Practice/Clinical/Patients/Diseases\\_And\\_Conditions/Fibromyalgia/](http://www.rheumatology.org/Practice/Clinical/Patients/Diseases_And_Conditions/Fibromyalgia/)

[3] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/general-health>

[4] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/aches-pains-other-ailments>

[5] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/chronic-conditions>

[6] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/snap-crackle-pop-%E2%80%94-scoliosis-and-back-cracking-0>

[7] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/tingling-fingers-0>

[8] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/health-benefits-yoga-0>

[9] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/medical-services-morningside>

[10] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/counseling-and-psychological-services-cps-morningside>

[11] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/medical-services-cuimc>

[12] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/mental-health-services-cuimc>