

# TIP OF THE MONTH

- Get moving to improve your Quality of Life with Fibromyalgia.
- Schedule a physical therapy consult.
- Join a wellness program or Pool Program.
- Join a gym.
- Get involved in a group exercise class that combines aerobic exercise and strengthening exercises.

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Current Research For  
Treating Fibromyalgia

# Current Research For Treating Fibromyalgia

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## Current Research for Treating Fibromyalgia

As defined by the 1990 American College of Rheumatology criteria, **Fibromyalgia (FM)** is a chronic, generalized musculoskeletal pain disorder with the presence of tender points on physical examination.<sup>1</sup> A patient with Fibromyalgia has many clinical presentations including fatigue, depression and muscle pain. The diagnosis of FM is based on two criteria.<sup>2</sup> First, the patient must present with 11 of 18 possible tender points spread over the body. These tender points, when palpated, must be described as “painful,” not just “tender.” Second, the patient must present with chronic, widespread pain.

Tender points are also referred to as Digitally Tender Points, or DTPs. They are present in more conditions than just FM. DTPs are also found in **Myofascial Pain Syndrome (MPS)**. MPS can be defined as a muscular pain disorder that affects the muscles and fascia throughout the body.<sup>3</sup> Fascia is a web of tissue that connects all the muscles and organs inside the body. The DTPs in myofascial pain syndrome are generally referred to as trigger points. In MPS, trigger points develop at the site of contact between muscle and fascia and produce referred pain, or pain away from the actual location of the trigger point. There has been considerable research related to Digitally Tender Points and what causes them. There has been no conclusive data, however there are many theories. For example, those who have researched DTPs relative to Fibromyalgia postulate that pain is physiologically processed differently.<sup>2</sup> The body is designed to reduce the pain that is felt on a daily basis to a tolerable level. Research has shown that people with FM show a lack in this inherent inhibition of the pain pathways.

Generally speaking, Fibromyalgia and Myofascial Pain Syndrome are separate conditions, although they can sometimes look the same. It is possible for someone to present with both conditions. The focus for the rest of this article will be on current treatments for Fibromyalgia.

Successful management of Fibromyalgia is generally difficult because no one has positively identified the root cause of the condition.<sup>1</sup> People of all ages can develop the condition, although it is most prevalent in women aged 35 to 50.<sup>1,4</sup> Fibromyalgia has been managed in a large number of ways. Pharmacotherapies, acupuncture, and physical therapy are just a few of these treatments. Physical Therapy treatments have commonly included treatments that focus specifically on pain relief, such as electrical stimulation and massage during acute flare-ups of the condition. There is, however, emerging evidence that regular exercise can have many positive effects in people with FM. The Ottawa Panel is a group of qualified professionals who are familiar with a particular diagnosis that, together, look into all of the evidence related to those diagnoses and develop Evidence-based Clinical Practice Guidelines (EBCPGs). The Ottawa Panel has published EBCPGs for osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis and stroke, among others.<sup>4</sup> In 2008, the Ottawa Panel published two separate sets of EBCPGs: One that evaluated aerobic fitness exercises as a mode of managing fibromyalgia<sup>4</sup>; And one that evaluated strengthening exercises as a mode of managing fibromyalgia.<sup>1</sup> After an extensive literature search of both kinds of exercises, there was evidence to support decreased pain and increased quality of life reports with both kinds of exercise. Specifically, aerobic exercises were found to have the greatest impact on psychological well-being, increasing endurance, decreasing anxiety, increasing self-efficacy, decreasing depression, increasing quality of life, muscle strength, cardio respiratory fitness, and flexibility.<sup>4</sup> The range of recommendations for aerobic exercises were 2-3 sessions per week at 45 minutes to one hour per session.

Strengthening exercises were shown to provide pain relief, increase quality of life ratings and increase muscle strength.<sup>1</sup> In general, there is stronger evidence to support aerobic exercises over strengthening exercises,<sup>4</sup> however, the evidence exists to include both in the regular management of Fibromyalgia.

The treatment of Fibromyalgia has historically been multimodal, and there is no evidence to suggest that it should not remain this way. The evidence presented here supports the need for physical activity as a way of managing the daily challenges of Fibromyalgia. Physical Therapy interventions can continue to include pain-reducing modalities as needed. However, physical therapists can also play an integral role in helping individuals with Fibromyalgia to develop a regular exercise program to assist in decreasing pain and increasing an individual's Quality of Life. Exercise programs are unique for each person, there are not specific exercises that are better than others. This is why it is important to work with a qualified professional, such as a physical therapist, to help develop an individualized program to suit one's needs.

### Reference:

- 1 Brosseau L, Wells GA, Egan M, et al. Ottawa panel evidence-based clinical practice guidelines for strengthening exercises in the management of fibromyalgia: part 2. *Phys Ther.* 2008;88(7):873-886.
- 2 Lewis C, Sterline M, Souvlis T. Digitally tender points: their significance in physiotherapy. *Physical Therapy Reviews.* 2008;13(3):188-196
- 3 Myofascial pain syndrome and fibromyalgia. [Fibromyalgia-symptoms.org. Available at: http://www.fibromyalgia-symptoms.org/fibromyalgia\\_myofascial.html](http://www.fibromyalgia-symptoms.org/fibromyalgia_myofascial.html)
- 4 Brosseau L, Wells GA, Tugwell P, et al. Ottawa panel evidence-based clinical practice guidelines for aerobic fitness exercises in the management of fibromyalgia: part 1. *Phys Ther.* 2008;88(7):857-871.

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