

Understanding and Treating Fibromyalgia for Long-term Relief

By **TERI GATTO**

SPECIAL TO HEALTH QUARTERLY

No one knows the root cause of fibromyalgia and there is no cure, but according to The National Institutes of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases this debilitating condition affects 5 million Americans age 18 or older. And while children, men and seniors have been known to develop the disease, between 80 and 90 percent of those diagnosed are middle-age women.

"Fibromyalgia is basically a clinical diagnosis," says Dr. Despina Psillides, medical director of the Graf Center for Integrative Medicine at Englewood Hospital and Medical Center. "There is no blood test or X-ray that identifies it."

"Typically, people will complain about having pain from head to toe, or pain in multiple body parts," says Robert S. Silverman, MD, medical director of Valley Hospital's Pain Management Center in Ridgewood.

According to Dr. Silverman, the pain that patients describe is muscular rather than sciatica-type pain, which can sometimes feel like an electric jolt. "Patients will say that their legs, arms or back are tender, almost like they have worked out," he adds.

Other common complaints of people diagnosed with fibromyalgia are fatigue, inability to sleep, cognitive and memory problems (sometimes referred to as "fibro fog") morning stiffness, headaches, irritable bowel syndrome, painful menstrual periods, numbness or tingling of the extremities, restless legs syndrome, temperature sensitivity and sensitivity to loud noises or bright lights.

"Rheumatologic diseases like lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, Sjogren's syndrome and a host of other autoimmune diseases can present symptoms similar to fibromyalgia or be existent with it," says Dr. Silverman.

"There is a growing correlation between fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue syndrome – what it is, exactly, is hard to know," says Dr. Psillides. "Is the fibromyalgia itself making the patient more susceptible to fatigue or it is something else?"

It's important to see a doctor as soon as you realize that there is something wrong. Addressing the associated problems of the condition, such as exhaustion, sleeplessness, stress and depression, among others, is key, because if these are ignored, they can worsen the fibromyalgia.

"If the patient has not consulted with another doctor prior to seeing me, the first thing I would do is to have a rheumatologist do an evaluation," says Dr. Silverman. "But if they've already been to a rheumatologist by the time they see me, and we agree on the diagnosis, we would

See **WOMEN'S HEALTH** Page 8
develop a multidisciplinary treatment approach to improve the patient's level of

activity. The treatment might include physical therapy, massage therapy, acupuncture and nutrition counseling."

It is very important for patients to share their detailed medical histories with their doctor. The more information patients can give, the better chance the doctor has to understand the problem.

"The unique aspect of integrated medicine is that it is tailored to a specific patient, it's not one-size-fits-all. I do a full, detailed intake, which includes all of your medical history, medications, and any treatments you've had," explains Dr. Psillides.

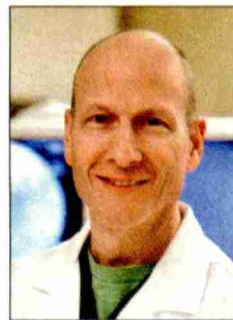
"We really delve deeply into areas such as what you eat and your exercise regimen. We even look at your family history, and if you had any birth trauma."

Dr. Psillides notes that being exposed to antibiotics at birth can have a negative effect on an adult patient's micro biome – the helpful bacteria that live in the stomach. This, in turn, may lead to gastrointestinal problems.

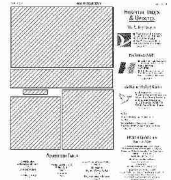
"People do not realize that what often triggers the pain and underlying fibromyalgia symptoms is food," she says. "Gluten, dairy, soy, sugar, and foods in the 'nightshade' category such as eggplants, tomatoes, peppers and potatoes, for example, can be triggers for fibromyalgia."

According to Dr. Psillides, there is a theory that fibromyalgia patients actually have reduced levels of certain neurotransmitters such as serotonin or Substance P – which is the body's natural pain reliever.

"Massage and acupuncture have actually been proven to work with neuro-



Dr. Robert Silverman



transmitters and help ease the pain," she says.

Since fibromyalgia is painfully debilitating, it often interferes with a person's ability to perform even simple daily tasks. This, in turn, can affect the patient's social and professional life, and can cause mental health problems.

According to Dr. Silverman, about 80 percent of patients suffering from fibromyalgia also suffer from depression. "We will suggest they speak to a psychologist, and if they are severely depressed, they might have to talk to a psychiatrist," he says. "The focus is to get the depression under control so we can treat the fibromyalgia. A big part of our goal is having our patients understand the disease so they can deal with it."

To control pain, Dr. Silverman prescribes Lyrica, which is used to treat nerve pain; Cymbalta, which is an antidepressant with pain-relieving qualities; or regular antidepressants, some of which have sedating characteristics that can help people dealing with sleeplessness issues.

"What we try to avoid at all costs is narcotics," says Dr. Silverman. "Over the years I've inherited patients who were taking very high doses of narcotics to manage their fibromyalgia. It's easy for someone with fibromyalgia to become dependent on narcotics, so this is a class of pain medication we really try avoid."

Still, even though fibromyalgia is a legitimate medical diagnosis, many doctors don't quite accept it. The outcome is that many patients feel stigmatized by the diagnosis.

"Fibromyalgia is a real disease," emphasizes Dr. Silverman. "And while it is not curable, it is treatable. It is good for families to understand that their loved one is suffering from a serious condition; it does exist and there is treatment for it."

"The main takeaway is that people can feel better," says Dr. Psillides. "Often, people with fibromyalgia think they will just have to live with pain, but they can absolutely get better, there is hope."

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Dr. Despina Psillides is a board-certified internist and the medical director of the Graf Center at Englewood Hospital and Medical Center, where integrative medicine, such as massage, acupuncture and nutrition counseling, is used in conjunction with traditional medicine to address the pain, fatigue and physical activity limitations that often are symptomatic of fibromyalgia.

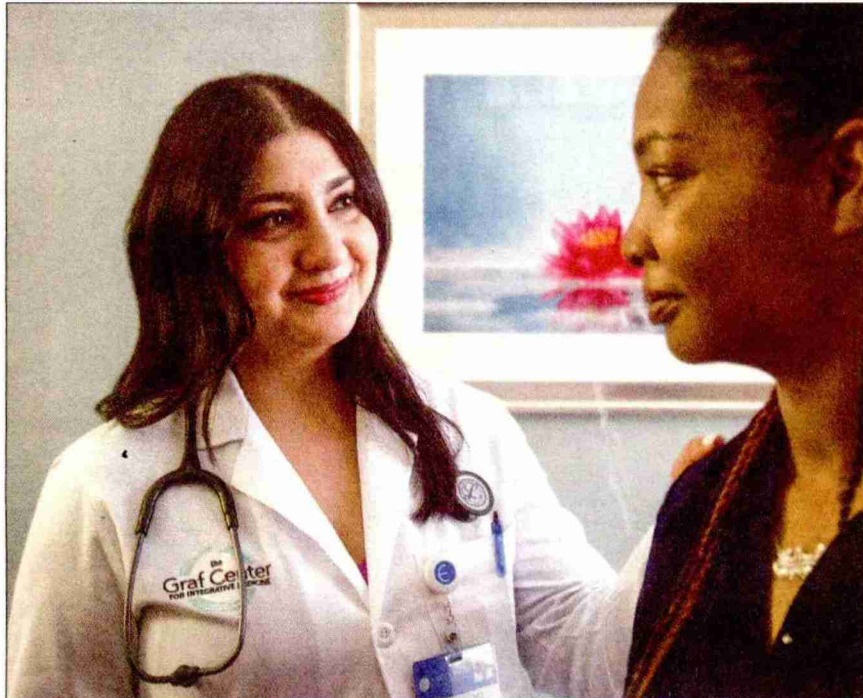




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Massage is one of the integrative medicine treatments that can provide relief and improve activity levels for fibromyalgia patients.