

Ayurvedic Support for Fibromyalgia

by Shannon Mooney

Fibromyalgia is a rheumatic disorder characterized by chronic achy muscular pain. Though it was recognized in ancient Ayurvedic texts written thousands of years ago, it has only recently been classified as a syndrome in the Western medical world. It is estimated that 5 to 6 million people suffer from fibromyalgia (FMS) in the United States. The real number of cases may be much higher due to misdiagnoses.

FMS can manifest similarly and share a number of the same symptoms as chronic fatigue syndrome, rheumatoid arthritis, Hepatitis C, Lyme disease, hypothyroidism, chronic myofascial pain, chemical sensitivities and food allergies. It is important to consult a health care practitioner to help with accurate diagnosis.

This condition can be accompanied by:

- chronic headaches
- fatigue
- strange skin sensations (extreme itching, sensitivity, numbness, tingling, crawling)
- insomnia
- irritable bowel syndrome (diarrhea often alternating with constipation)
- temporo-mandibular joint syndrome (TMJ)
- depression

It is also common for people with FMS to have painful premenstrual syndrome, anxiety, palpitations, and dizziness. Many of these are typically viewed in Ayurveda as an indication of a vata imbalance. Pitta dosha is also involved, classic symptoms being chronic headaches with sensitivity to light, skin sensitivities and depression. Ayurvedic management of FMS is aimed to bring balance to these two doshas and eliminate toxins in the body.

FMS can occur as either a primary or secondary condition which can further complicate proper diagnosis. While it is commonly found as a secondary disorder to auto-immune diseases such as hypothyroidism, it has also been found to exhibit as a secondary disorder to conditions such as sleep apnea.

It is common for a person to exhibit signs of both fibromyalgia and depression making it difficult to determine which one precedes the other. Though the exact relationship between FMS and depression is still unclear, there are many causes of depression that may contribute or also be causal factors in the condition of FMS. These include genetic factors (people with a family or personal history of clinical depression have a higher risk for FMS) and low levels of neurotransmitters, specifically serotonin. Not everyone with FMS has the side effect of depression, but those who do should seek treatment and support in order to better manage FMS with a positive mental state.

The primary diagnostic tool to identify FMS is soreness and sensitivity of 11 out of 18 specific trigger points found in areas of the lower back, neck, shoulders, back of head at the occipital bones, upper chest, thighs and hips. The soreness is considered chronic once consistently noted for a duration of

three months. These points can be tested by applying moderate pressure with the thumb. The following link maps the triggers points for FMS:

<http://www.gp-training.net/rheum/fibromy.htm>

There is no specific cause nor effective cure for FMS. The symptoms tend to come on gradually and increase in intensity. These can be made worse by a number of factors, including stress, trauma, lack of exercise, lack of sleep, infections, anxiety, and depression.

Common painkillers such as aspirin, acetaminophen, and ibuprofen are not usually effective in relieving the pain of FMS. Ayurveda offers natural recommendations that bring attention to diet and lifestyle and improve daily life. Ayurvedic herbs and medicated oil treatments can also be of great benefit in pacifying many of the symptoms caused by high vata and pitta dosha. Because FMS is a chronic condition, consistent therapy is necessary in order to experience improvement.

Diet

An Ayurvedic diet is a healthy one, rich in whole grains, fruits and vegetables. Be sure to include the freshest ingredients possible, choosing nutritious, organically grown foods that will renew energy and build immunity. Generally, a diet pacifying to both vata and pitta doshas is recommended.

Here are some other general considerations:

- Limit alcohol, caffeine, and sugar consumption. These substances promote fatigue and depression, can increase pain and disturb sleep.
- Sip hot ginger tea throughout the day to aid digestion and help cleanse the body of toxins.

Lifestyle

One most of the most important recommendations for people with FMS is to be sure to set aside enough time for sleep. Most people with FMS have an associated sleep disorder resulting in a reduction of periods of REM sleep which is the restful state necessary to recharge the body. Instead of reaching the state of deep sleep, a person has waking brain activity. Other common sleep disorders associated with FMS are sleep apnea, restless leg syndrome, bruxism (jaw clenching and/or teeth grinding), and muscle spasms. Chronic sleep loss or insomnia can result, making a person more sensitive to pain symptoms and more susceptible to illness. Set aside at least eight hours and make an effort to improve the quality of sleep by engaging in a relaxing activity beforehand such as meditating or listening to soothing music.

Regular massage therapy can be of great benefit for people with FMS. Warm oil massage helps to increase the blood flow to the muscles and stimulate the release of toxins. Ayurveda particularly uses the soft and soothing qualities of oil to balance vata dosha. Mahanarayan Oil is a powerful medicinal oil that has a mild analgesic effect which helps reduce muscle and joint soreness. Vata Massage Oil can also be used in abhyanga (self-oil massage) or by a massage therapist.

Ayurvedic pancha karma are therapies that have traditionally been used to help relieve many symptoms associated with fibromyalgia. Pizichili is a therapy where warm oil is continuously applied while the body is simultaneously massaged. Shirodhara is a continuous pouring of warm oil on the third eye center. Both therapies help remove toxins from the body, are restorative to all three doshas, and relieve stress from the central nervous system. Shirodhara, in particular, is indicated for insomnia

and exhaustion. These oil therapies are very beneficial in promoting restful sleep.

Light to moderate exercise such as walking helps to keep muscles healthy. Walking pumps the blood across the muscles, nourishing and strengthening them. This type of exercise also helps to stimulate the muscles to release toxins. Exercise helps to improve mood and the body's ability to handle stress. In addition, many people find exercise to be one of the most powerful natural remedies to treat depression.

Herbs

Amalaki is a great digestive aid and rejuvenative for pitta. This herb can help to gently detoxify the body and eliminate excess pitta dosha.

Chyavanprash is an excellent nutritive jam that helps elevate energy levels, reducing the debilitating effect of fatigue.

Include Triphala to support elimination, detoxification and tonification of the gastro-intestinal tract.

Mahanarayan Oil helps to relieve sore muscles and stiff joints. Vata Massage Oil contains herbs to calm the nervous system and strengthen the body.

Yoga

Ayurveda understands the techniques of yoga, including asana, prananyama and meditation, are a way to influence thoughts and emotions in direct relationship to the biochemistry of the body. Yoga can be extremely beneficial in the treatment of chronic disease, helping to transform negative qualities of the mind and promote general well-being. Cultivating a positive state of mind has a tremendous restorative impact on the entire system of the body.

The practice of asana brings energy and flexibility to the body, reduces stiffness of muscles and joints, and calms the mind. Practicing yoga first thing in the morning can help to relieve the discomfort upon waking typically associated with FMS. Include a forward bend (uttanasana), knees-to-chest (apanasana) and a restorative pose, such as legs-up-the-wall. The emphasis should be on gentle movement and deep diaphragmatic breathing.

Pranayama

The practice of regulating the breath revitalizes the body and is a valuable tool to manage pain. Many people tend to hold their breath, or keep the breath shallow in the upper chest, in reaction to the experience of pain. This type of holding creates tension in the body which many times intensifies the pain. Re-circulating the breath through the body acts as an internal massage, sending a message to the nervous system that everything is okay. Begin to notice where the tension is in the body and allow it to soften and release. Bring attention to the breath, allowing it to be as natural and free-flowing as possible. Try to breathe into the areas that are painful. Encourage big sighs and emphasize the exhalation. Begin to draw out the exhalation so that it is twice as long as the inhalation. Simple mental counting can serve as a guide. Inhale to the count of four, exhale to the count of eight. With each exhalation, let go a little bit more, sinking deeper into a sensation of relaxation.

Meditation

Establish a regular habit of sitting in a special, quiet place each day. Before meditating, take a few

minutes to practice mental, emotional and spiritual affirmations. Affirmations can help to break out of detrimental thought patterns, lift the veil of depression and improve mental and emotional states. Meditating for short periods each day can greatly reduce anxiety and stress. Many people find relief of both fatigue and pain associated with FMS with regular meditation.