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5 Ways to Manage Your Fibromyalgia

NIH-supported experts explain how you can help relieve symptoms

Daniel Clauw, M.D., studies chronic pain at the University of Michigan.

Lifestyle changes and self care are critical to improving your quality of life with fibromyalgia. We asked two top fibromyalgia experts and NIH grantees—Leslie Crofford, M.D., of Vanderbilt University, and Daniel Clauw, M.D., of the University of Michigan—for tips on the best things patients can do for themselves.

1 **Exercise regularly.** It may hurt to move at first, but research shows that gradually increasing exercise can reduce pain. Start slowly with gentle movements like tai chi or yoga, says Dr. Crofford. "Communication between the brain and body is abnormal in fibromyalgia, but regular exercise helps the brain become more normally accustomed to your body's movements."

2 **Understand that there's no magic pill.** "There's no easy fix with chronic pain," says Dr. Clauw. Similar to other chronic conditions, like diabetes or asthma, patients must take an active role in managing their symptoms with lifestyle changes. "Doctors who treat fibromyalgia or other chronic pain conditions with drugs alone will fail," he says.

3 **Reduce stress.** Identifying stressful triggers in your life is important because stress can worsen fibromyalgia, says Dr. Crofford. She recommends cognitive behavioral therapy to teach ways to cope with emotional stress and depression. These strategies can include avoiding negative self-talk, learning to relax, prioritizing tasks to conserve energy, and coping with pain flare-ups.

4 **Get enough sleep.** Fibromyalgia's fatigue and pain are linked, with each one worsening the other. That's probably because the same neurotransmitters that control pain also control sleep, mood, and memory, says Dr. Clauw. This makes getting enough sleep essential by following good sleep habits: go to bed and wake at the same time each day, reduce daytime napping, and get enough exercise.

5 **Try other non-drug treatments.** Research funded by NIH's National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health shows mind-body practices can have benefits for fibromyalgia. In addition to tai chi and yoga, there has been encouraging evidence for cognitive behavioral therapy, massage therapy, and acupuncture in improving pain, stiffness, fatigue, and depression. ■