

Fibromyalgia:
The Pain That Just Won't Quit
By Frank Gemmato, LAc

Marianne is typical of many fibromyalgia sufferers. When we first met, this healthy-looking 47-year-old insurance claims adjuster complained of severe muscle pain in her back, arms and legs, that got worse with the slightest exertion. The problem began several years ago after a minor back strain. The pain was now sharp and so severe that it often kept her awake and agitated all night. Numerous visits to medical doctors had yielded limited results. She was told the pain was all in her head, that she was depressed. An antidepressant, amitriptyline, was prescribed that did take a bit of the edge off her pain by helping her to sleep a little more deeply, but her situation hadn't fundamentally changed.

Convinced that she was not getting to the cause of her problem, Marianne came to my office in search of an alternative approach to dealing with this devastating syndrome.

Properly speaking fibromyalgia is not a disease, but rather a combination of various symptoms. It affects mostly women, particularly those in middle and old age. Pain is often severe, constant and nagging and most often distributed along 18 "trigger points" on the neck, shoulders, low back, and extremities. Along with muscular pain, fibromyalgia can have a number of accompanying symptoms like depression, fatigue, insomnia, headaches, bloating, and tingling sensations (parasthesias). Other "modern" diseases like chronic fatigue syndrome and multiple chemical sensitivities have similar symptoms.

Causes of Fibromyalgia

There are many contributing causes of fibromyalgia. It is believed that the syndrome begins with a minor trauma to the muscles as a result of an injury. The micro circulation to the surrounding tissue is impaired, causing pain. This leads to a disturbance of sleep which further aggravates the condition. A vicious cycle takes over whereby the person can't sleep deeply because of the pain and the pain worsens with continued lack of sleep. This results in damage to the mitochondria, which are the tiny energy factories inside the cells.

It is also likely that a low-grade virus may be the cause in some cases of fibromyalgia. And finally there is in some cases an accumulation of "Dampness and Heat" which account for sensations of heaviness, aversion to heat and accumulation of mucus in the body.

An array of treatments

Acupuncture is an excellent approach to the pain and other symptoms of fibromyalgia, because it unblocks the stagnated energy in the localized trigger

points. It also stimulates the immune system, helping the body to neutralize active low grade viruses. By releasing endorphins from the brain, acupuncture can minimize pain, improve sleep, elevate mood, and tonify the whole body.

Nutritional deficiencies also must be corrected if relief of the symptoms is to be long-lasting. Ubiquinone, also called Co-enzyme Q10, has been shown to improve oxygen metabolism dramatically. Other key nutritional components are magnesium and malic acid, which is found in apples. These have been shown to reduce trigger point tenderness significantly. The intricacies of dealing with this problem require the advice of a skilled practitioner familiar with the latest research in nutrition.

If a viral component is suspected, immune enhancing herbs like garlic and echinacea may also be beneficial. And special herb combinations to clear the “Damp Heat” may aid in eliminating the sensation of heaviness and heat.

And finally it may be necessary to evaluate the condition of the digestive, elimination and detoxification systems. This can be accomplished by filling out a Complete Health Appraisal Questionnaire. The ingestion of special formulations which stimulate liver detoxification enzymes and enhance gastrointestinal function may then be prescribed as indicated.

Progressive Victory

After 12 acupuncture treatments, some dietary adjustments, and herbal and nutritional supplementation, Marianne experiences life much differently. Her headaches have disappeared and her energy level much improved. She sleeps well at night, is no longer depressed, and best of all, her pain level has receded to a minimum. She has begun to exercise regularly, first gently stretching her muscles and then slowly building to brisk walking 5 times a week.

Acupuncture and alternative medicine properly applied can make a huge difference in the management of the pain that just won't quit.

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