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Summary
This guide has been created for those living with Fibromyalgia. My hope is to provide some beneficial information about several key areas that will allow you to make choices that positively impact your symptoms. Too often when patients are diagnosed with Fibromyalgia they leave the office with nothing more than a prescription. If they are given any real advice from their doctor it is to exercise; advice that can be hurtful both mentally and physically (if approached the wrong way). Therefore, I felt it was important that I begin this guide with a few details on Fibromyalgia, how it is diagnosed, and what medications are typically prescribed (and why), followed by advice on exercise. I’d originally included this information later in the guide, but because exercise is typically the first advice a patient receives I felt that it was important for you, the patient, to understand both why the doctor is giving you this advice and more importantly how to put it to use without hurting yourself.

Next, I will cover some alternative therapies that have been scientifically shown to improve one or multiple symptoms of Fibromyalgia. Medical doctors will rarely direct you to alternative therapies; however, they can often be as (if not more) helpful than any medications the doctor will prescribe. Many times, if you find the right provider, these alternative therapies are also covered by insurance. I will follow this with a discussion of diet changes that can help improve your symptoms. I discuss the diet changes that I have personally found beneficial, and address why certain foods should be avoided entirely by those with Fibromyalgia, and why other foods can actually improve your symptoms. I follow this with detailed information on vitamins and supplements that have been shown, through scientific studies, to improve symptoms related to Fibromyalgia.

The last section I cover is on pacing. This is an area that is often overlooked completely, yet for me, and many others, pacing has been the thing that has helped most. Learning to manage time greatly improves stress, which can help reduce pain and improve sleep. When all of these areas are addressed together it is possible to reduce the negative symptoms associated with Fibromyalgia and improve your quality of life. That is my goal for you.

About the Cover

When considering the cover for this guide I wanted to choose an image that displayed the hope for the positive outcomes that I hope this book will give you. You can choose to see whatever you want to see. Life with Fibro is never perfect, sometimes even when enjoying a beautiful beach we may be in pain, we may be down, but that doesn’t mean we can’t get out there and still try to enjoy it the best we can.
Introduction

Fibromyalgia is a debilitating disorder that is primarily characterized by widespread chronic pain. This is a disorder that I was diagnosed with in 2010. Looking back I believe I’ve had symptoms since my late teen years. Prior to 2010 I worked full-time running my own business and was going to school full-time in an attempt to finish a degree. The first few years after I was diagnosed I was completely debilitated. I couldn’t take classes and I was barely working. There were months that I rarely left the bed, and at one point depression took over making me question whether life was worth living. I almost gave up, but I didn’t. And, I’m glad I didn’t because I did eventually find answers that helped me.

During the years since being diagnosed I have tried many things to improve my symptoms, from the standard pharmaceutical treatments recommended by my doctors to alternative treatments and supplements. It wasn’t until 2013 that I really felt I was ready to try anything and finally made some of the biggest changes of my life. I found great improvement through lifestyle changes that included changes to my diet, exercise schedule, pacing, and adding other alternative therapies. These changes allowed me to reduce the medications I was taking, and in addition to feeling better, I lost the 40 pounds that I’d gained because of the medications.

Before my diagnosis was confirmed I began a blog – countingmyspoons.com – where I have shared what I’ve learned. Writing on my blog, and as the Fatigue Category Expert Writer for Answers.com I have spent a lot of time researching Fibromyalgia, chronic pain, and Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. I continue to research and share what I learn with my readers and my goal is to summarize just a bit of that information here for you. My inclusion of any information here does not indicate endorsement. I’ve tried most of the treatments, medications, and supplements that I will list. Some have worked for me, others have not.

Created by Julie Ryan
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All patients with Fibromyalgia are different and what works for one may not work for another. Finding the best recovery plan for you requires trial and error and willingness to try anything. The following suggestions should not be taken as medical advice. Where possible I will provide sources so that, if you choose, you can research each suggestion further and create a health plan that will hopefully work for you.
Fibromyalgia Basics

Fibromyalgia is a very polarizing and stigmatizing disorder. Too often it is still considered a “trash can” diagnosis because it is a diagnosis of exclusion. There is no blood test or imaging test for Fibromyalgia, instead doctors must run those types of tests to rule out other diseases and disorders with symptoms that overlap Fibromyalgia, including Lupus, Multiple Sclerosis, and Lyme disease. Despite all of this Fibromyalgia is a very real disorder.

Fibromyalgia is characterized by widespread chronic pain. According to the Centers for Disease Control, Fibromyalgia affects over five million Americans, 90% of which are women. It is unknown why so few men are diagnosed with Fibromyalgia. Some believe that it is not because men are less likely to suffer the symptoms, but because men are often taught to “suck it up” and ignore pain. Men are 33% less likely to visit a doctor than women, according to the CDC (2001). Therefore, there may be many more men suffering from Fibromyalgia who simply have not been diagnosed.

It is important to understand that Fibromyalgia is a disorder, not a disease (at least not at this point). A disorder is a cluster of symptoms or an abnormality of function. There are many common disorders including migraines, Irritable bowel syndrome, and insomnia. Fibromyalgia is a cluster of symptoms that includes widespread chronic pain --widespread meaning that the pain exists in all four quadrants of the body and chronic meaning that it has continued for a period of three months or longer. Along with the chronic pain, Fibromyalgia also comes with a list of other symptoms that include sleep disturbance, waking unrefreshed, fatigue, IBS, and migraines (Questions and Answers about Fibromyalgia, 2014).

Despite many studies attempting to find the cause of Fibromyalgia, the origin still remains unclear. While it was initially considered a rheumatological disorder, and is still typically treated by a rheumatologist, current research seems to indicate that it may be more of a neurological disorder in how the brain receives pain information from the nerves (Gracely, Petzke, Wolf, & Clauw, 2002).

For many patients, Fibromyalgia seems to have a definite beginning; they can point at one specific incident and name that as the time their symptoms began. This incident is typically a very stressful event either physically or mentally (an illness, surgery, or death in the family).

Patients diagnosed with Fibromyalgia often have other overlapping auto-immune issues --such as thyroid disorders or Lupus. Some studies have indicated that Fibromyalgia may be a heritable disorder
(Arnold, et al., 2013). According to rheumatologist Daniel Clauw, you are eight times more likely to be diagnosed with Fibromyalgia if a family member has it (Underwood, 2009).

Symptoms of Fibromyalgia are very broad and affect every system of the body. Patients initially may seek out a doctor because of the chronic widespread pain and insomnia; however, symptoms often expand. Patients with Fibromyalgia often have many co-existing conditions such as migraines and IBS; often these issues pre-date other Fibromyalgia symptoms. No two Fibromyalgia patients are exactly alike in either symptomology or treatment. A treatment that works well for one patient may do nothing for another.

If Fibromyalgia is a diagnosis of exclusion, how is it diagnosed?

Once other possible causes for the symptoms have been ruled out, the doctor performs an examination that involves pressing on what are known as tender points. There are 18 of these tender points throughout the body. The doctor needs only apply a light touch to these areas to elicit a pain response from those with Fibromyalgia. This light touch would feel like nothing on other areas of the body, or on the same areas of a healthy person. Even someone with Fibromyalgia typically will not have a painful response to all 18 tender points, but they typically will respond to at least half of them. It is this pain response combined with other reported symptoms that will lead a doctor to a Fibromyalgia diagnosis (Wolfe, et al., 2010).

Once diagnosed, Fibromyalgia is treated differently depending on the person; however, there are a few standard treatments that doctors start with on most patients, including antidepressants, muscle relaxers, and medications used to treat nerve pain. Non-pharmaceutical treatments such as supplements, dietary changes, exercise, and alternative medicine can also help many. In the following sections I will provide more information about each of these different types of treatments that can reduce Fibromyalgia treatments.
Medical Treatment Options
There are three medications that have been approved by the FDA to treat Fibromyalgia symptoms, however, there are many others that doctors have had success using “off label” (meaning simply that a medication is being prescribed in a way other that it has been specifically approved by the FDA). The three medications that have been specifically approved to treat Fibromyalgia are Lyrica, Cymbalta, and Savella (Living with Fibromyalgia, Drugs Approved to Manage Pain, 2014).

Lyrica (Pregabalin) was originally approved as an anti-seizure medication. It affects the neurotransmitters acting as an anticonvulsant that reduces anxiety and works to relieve nerve pain commonly associated with neuropathy. It possibly does all of this by affecting specific neurotransmitters in the brain. Savella and Cymbalta both function in the same way as anti-depressants, but they have individually been found to also improve Fibromyalgia symptoms, including neuropathic pain. Savella was the first drug created specifically to treat Fibromyalgia (Savella for Fibromyalgia Treatment). According to a survey from The National Pain Report (2014) less than 40% of patients that take any of these three medications have found them beneficial.

(Anson, 2014)

Before any medications were approved specifically to treat Fibromyalgia, doctors found that anti-depressant medications often helped ease the pain associated with Fibromyalgia. Doctors will often start with a low-dose antidepressant along with muscle relaxers to help ease the pain caused by muscle stiffness and improve sleep (Boyles, 2009). Most patients wonder why doctors begin with antidepressants. Many think that the doctor just believes they are depressed and that the pain is psychosomatic (a fancy way of saying it’s all in your head). But, that is not the case. Antidepressants are used because they affect the same areas in the brain that are responsible for handling pain. By adjusting neurotransmitters within the brain it is possible to decrease the pain that the body feels (Moret & Briley, 2006). Of course, some patients are experiencing depression with their chronic pain, and rightfully so,
because the pain has often prevented them from living a normal life. Most people feel depressed when they feel their life has been taken away.

Muscle relaxers are used to reduce muscle spasms and pain associated with muscle stiffness, as well as to help improve sleep. These are commonly administered along with a low-dose antidepressant for the treatment of Fibromyalgia. Because disturbed sleep is a common issue for those with Fibromyalgia, it is believed that treating the sleep disturbance can help improve the overall symptoms. There is a bit of a “chicken and egg” debate about whether the pain causes the sleep disturbance or the sleep disturbance is causing the pain; therefore, many doctors feel it is best to attack from both sides. A 2011 study showed that low doses of benzodiazepine muscle relaxers improved sleep by 18%, resulting in reduced fatigue. This treatment also resulted in pain reduction of 30% as well as reduced tenderness and depression (Doheny, 2011).

Medications to relieve nerve pain may also be helpful, as that is another common cause of Fibromyalgia pain. These medications include Gabapentin, which is similar to Lyrica. A review of studies that examined treating Fibromyalgia with Gabapentin indicated that it typically helps 30-40% of those who take it, while causing adverse side effects in about 60% of those who take it. These side effects may include nausea, dizziness, and sleepiness (Gabapentin for chronic neuropathic pain and fibromyalgia in adults, 2014). Another medication commonly used to treat nerve pain is Tramadol. Both Gabapentin and Tramadol have been successfully used to treat diabetic neuropathy. Many who suffer from Fibromyalgia related nerve pain have found the use of Tramadol or Gabapentin (or both) to be helpful. This may be a result of Small Fiber Polyneuropathy (SFPN), which has been noted in about 50% of Fibromyalgia patients who have been tested. SFPN is the same type of neuropathy that commonly affects diabetics, and while it is most commonly associated with pain and numbness in the hands and feet, the small nerve fibers that it affects are actually found throughout the body, and can also cause digestion, urinary, sexual, and blood pressure issues (Hovaguimian & Gibbons, 2011).

Non-steroidal Anti-inflammatory medications (NSAIDs) can help reduce pain that results from inflammation. While NSAIDs work to treat this specific type of pain, they do not work as a stand-alone Fibromyalgia treatment (Goldenberg, Felson, & Dinerman, 1986). Long-term daily use of NSAIDs can also result in stomach ulcers. As a last resort, your doctor may prescribe opioids to relieve your pain. Opioid pain relievers have been at the center of a great amount of controversy in the last few years, as doctors and the government have questioned whether they are being over-prescribed. While some evidence indicates that opioids are not helpful for the neuropathic pain associated with Fibromyalgia, many patients feel that opioids are their best source of pain relief (Ngian, Guymer, & Littlejohn, 2011). This may be because there are multiple sources of pain involved in Fibromyalgia.

Your doctor may prescribe one or a combination of these medications. Before you begin any medication regimen take the time to research the individual medications and talk to your doctor about any concerns that you may have.
Exercise

Exercise is a touchy subject for those living with Fibromyalgia. For most, the first advice they received after hearing their diagnosis was “you need to exercise.” Most feel like they can barely move so they wonder how they can possibly exercise more. Others feel like their doctor is blaming them for their disorder, as if their lack of exercise is why they hurt. This is especially hurtful as many who are hearing this have been avid exercisers right up to the point when they could no longer move without pain. The problem for many is that they don’t know what exercises they should be doing or how much. They try to take their doctor’s advice and jump in to full workouts thinking it will make them feel better, when, in fact, it only makes them feel worse. Unfortunately, most doctors aren’t very good at providing specific advice, which is why I felt it was important to include this advice as early as possible in this guide. For exercise to help improve Fibromyalgia, It’s a balancing act of getting enough, but not too much, of the right types of exercise.

Multiple studies have shown that light regular exercise can help improve symptoms of Fibromyalgia. How much exercise and what type is best depends largely on the person. Most patients find that they need to start out very slowly, exercising just a few minutes a day, and then build up over time. Continued sitting and laying down without regular movement leads to shrinking of the muscles and fascia (the thread-like fibers that wrap around the muscles and organs) causing increased pain and tightness. Regular stretching and exercise allows lengthening of the muscles, decreases stiffness and tension, and thereby decreases pain.

Stretching is the most important exercise for those suffering from Fibromyalgia. A common issue for those dealing with Fibromyalgia is the tightening of the muscles and fascia. Regular stretching helps reduce that tightening. De Lorena, de Lima, Ranzolin, and Duarte (2015) reviewed five studies examining the effects of muscle stretching on Fibromyalgia. All five studies showed improvement in Fibromyalgia pain, as well as improvement in general quality of life. There are a number of stretches that you can do without even leaving the bed. You can take a look at a few of these on my website (Ryan, 2015).

Water aerobics in a heated pool is often the best way for those who suffer from Fibromyalgia and related pain conditions to start exercising. Water aerobics is the exercise most frequently recommended by doctors treating Fibromyalgia (Wilson, Spencer, & Kortebein, 2012). Exercising in water creates a virtually weightless workout, removing the pressure from the joints, and reducing the pain that many endure when walking or doing other types of exercise. Almost any exercise that you can do on land can be done in the water. A heated pool allows you to work out without the muscle pain and stiffness that would come with cold water. Also, since
many Fibromyalgia patients complain of excess sweating, exercising in water helps decrease this symptom. A 2008 review by McVeigh, McGaughey, Hall, and Kane looked at ten studies examining the effects of water-based exercise on Fibromyalgia; these studies all showed a moderate to high improvement in pain scores, tender points, and overall health status. A physical therapist that uses water-based physical therapy can be a great way to start. They can work with you on relaxation, as well as on teaching you specific movements that will help improve your functionality.

**Yoga and Tai Chi** both help improve flexibility, ease muscle stiffness, and create a feeling of increased focus and relaxation. While yoga focuses on stretching and holding specific positions to increase flexibility, Tai Chi focuses more on connected movements. A 2012 review of studies examining the effectiveness of Tai Chi on improving symptoms in those with chronic illness found that in 18 out of 21 studies tai chi was shown to significantly improve quality of life (Li, Yuan, & Zhang, 2014).

Tai Chi is done mostly from standing positions, so it may be more difficult for those who have knee or hip issues, however it may also help with those issues. Movements can be modified so that they can be done with the assistance of a chair to help with balance. Tai Chi classes can be difficult to find, but there are many great videos for both yoga and Tai Chi.

There are many different types of yoga and some can be very intense. It is important that prior to attending a class you speak to the instructor and make sure that they understand your limitations, and can work with you. Avoid advanced classes and seek out Restorative yoga classes, or classes focused on joint recovery, arthritis, or the elderly. You may even find a class specifically for those dealing with chronic pain issues. A 2011 study evaluating the effects of yoga on Fibromyalgia symptoms found that attending yoga classes regularly may not only improve pain, and increase movement, but it can improve your ability to accept your illness (Curtis, Osadchuk, & Katz, 2011). Videos are a great way to slowly test your limits with tai chi.
and yoga, allowing you to see what you can handle, working out at your own comfort level. Never try to push yourself too far.

**Walking** is by far the most accessible way to exercise. You don’t need any equipment, videos, or special locations. You can simply walk in place, walk around your house, or just walk out your front door and see how far your feet can take you. If you’ve not been moving much you may find that a short walk around your house is all you can handle, but keep trying each day. Soon you may find yourself outside getting the mail, then doing a lap around your house, and before long you’ll find yourself down the street enjoying a beautiful day. That can be difficult to imagine when the idea of simply standing up wears you out. Walking, and aerobic exercise in general, is very important because it increases the amount of oxygen in your blood (Dinler, et al., 2009).

Exercise is of great importance for all Fibromyalgia patients. In the end, it matters less which type of exercise you choose, but that you actually do exercise on a regular basis. Even if all you do is stretch each day before you get out of bed, it’s a start, and it will help you feel better. Regular movement of some kind decreases the overall pain levels seen among those who have joined in studies of the various types of exercise. Sitting or lying down without regular movement will result in a tightening and shrinking of your muscles and fascia, increasing your overall pain levels. Talk with your doctor before you begin any exercise program.
Alternative Therapies

A number of alternative therapies have been shown to be effective for relieving some symptoms of Fibromyalgia. A 2010 review of alternative therapies by Porter et al. found that acupuncture, balneotherapy, biofeedback, massage, and meditation could all relieve some symptoms of Fibromyalgia (Porter, Jason, Boulton, Bothne, & Coleman, 2010). Additionally, other studies have found that music therapy and myofascial release are beneficial to those with Fibromyalgia. A recent survey by the National Pain Report showed that patients find alternative therapies to be as (if not much more) effective than prescription medications (Anson, 2014).

Acupuncture is an ancient Chinese practice of inserting tiny needles along a line of what are called “meridians”. It is supposed to help balance and restore energy to the body. Given this description you can understand why many people think it may be a sham treatment. However, Porter et al. looked at 11 studies that examined the effectiveness of acupuncture in Fibromyalgia patients. Ten of the studies found that acupuncture was effective for improving Fibromyalgia symptoms.

Acupuncture involves inserting tiny needles just through the first layer of the skin, as such it is not without negative side effects. There are some complaints of pain and even bruising after acupuncture treatment. I’ve received acupuncture for migraines and neck pain for over seven years. I have had mild bruising on occasion, and have found that typically the more the needle hurts the more it actually helps improve my pain.

Balneotherapy is a therapy that involves bathing in warm water, which may or may not contain other additives (typically salt or essential oils). McVeigh, McGaughey, Hall, & Kane (2008) looked at six studies that examined the effects of balneotherapy on Fibromyalgia symptoms. All five of those studies showed improvement, with four showing improvement to at least one specific Fibromyalgia symptom. These results are not surprising because warm water can relax the muscles and ease pain. Adding something as simple as Epsom salts to the bath increases the body’s magnesium intake and improves the muscles’
ability to relax. Many with Fibromyalgia find that taking a warm bath each night with Epsom salt aids in relaxation, decrease pain, and improve sleep.

**Biofeedback** is the idea of using some sort of biological feedback to gain control of what are otherwise believed to be automatic processes, such as blood pressure, heart rate, or even pain. Biofeedback (also called Neurofeedback) uses a machine to monitor one or more aspects of the patient’s physical state and provide instant feedback that they can see or hear. Over time the patient learns to respond to the feedback and relax or focus their attention in a way that changes their physical state. In three out of four studies reviewed by Porter et al., biofeedback was effective in reducing Fibromyalgia-related symptoms. Biofeedback is a process that requires many sessions to learn, and typically positive effects are not seen until at least the second week.

A quick way to try biofeedback is with a “mood ring”. Mood rings change color based on changes to your body temperature. You can wear one and when you see that it is changing towards “hot” colors you are likely feeling more stressed out. When this occurs you can try to focus on breathing deep and relaxing to bring your temperature down. The changes in breathing and calming that occur by simply focusing can aid in relaxation, which can help reduce pain.

**Massage therapy** is not only relaxing, but it can provide relief for many Fibromyalgia symptoms. The review by Porter et al. combined not only massage but chiropractic manipulations and myofascial release. There are a number of types of massage and each can be helpful for different purposes. Many with Fibromyalgia may find that some types of massage (e.g. deep tissue) are too rough and increase pain. Other types of massage that are intended to aid in relaxation and movement may be more helpful, these include Watsu (a water-based massage therapy) and Myofascial Release (which is a therapy that works to release the fascia just below the skin).

The review by Porter et al. looked at four studies on the effects of massage on Fibromyalgia, noting that three showed positive effects. They did not specify what type of massage was used, and the lengths of treatment varied; however, it was generally found that massage did improve symptoms but only temporarily.

**Meditation** is a process of focusing attention on the breath and specific thoughts. Meditation involves actively relaxing the mind; by focusing on the breath you free the mind from thinking about the things that are stressing you (including pain). Stress is known to increase chronic pain. By using a stress management tool like meditation you can reduce stress and thereby reduce your pain, improve relaxation, and sleep quality (Meditation: A simple, fast way to reduce stress, 2014).

Porter et al. reviewed five studies that examined the effects of meditation on Fibromyalgia. All five of these studies showed positive improvements in some symptoms. Three of the studies showed a reduction of pain symptoms.

**Music Therapy.** Most people find that when they can distract themselves with their favorite music they can relax and take their focus off of their troubles, including their pain. A study by Garza-Villarreal, et al. (2014) found that slow pleasant music that is self-chosen by the participant can not only reduce ratings of pain, but can also improve functional movement. Music Therapy is focused on combining music and cognitive therapy to help the patient reach their goals. Many find that music helps them communicate better and process their feelings. If you find that music perks you up, then perhaps you should turn it
up! If there is certain music that helps you relax that may be better for days when you are more sensitive or stressed. Unfortunately, sensitivity to noise can decrease the enjoyment of music for many with Fibromyalgia making this a very subjective treatment option.

Myofascial release is a gentle manipulation of the fascia, a soft tissue that wraps around and connects throughout the body. The fascia is the chicken-skin like tissue that lies just below the skin, but also weaves throughout the body protecting and surrounding the organs. What is often referred to as scar tissue is actually a tightening of this fascia tissue. Fascia can be negatively impacted through any stress to the body, causing it to tighten, which can lead to pain. Castro-Sánchez, et al. (2011) examined the effects of myofascial release on Fibromyalgia patients over a 20 week treatment period. They found that immediately after treatment patients showed reduced anxiety levels and reported improved sleep and decreased pain. These improvements continued at one month following the treatments.

All alternative treatments are somewhat subjective, as are all treatments for Fibromyalgia. What works for one may not work for another. It is important that you keep an open mind and consider trying new options as they are presented to you and as you can afford them. Unfortunately, many alternative treatments are not covered by insurance, and are therefore cost prohibitive for many patients. But, it’s always worth checking with the providers to find out if the treatment is covered by your insurance.
Diet Changes

Healing nutritional habits are important regardless of your health state, but even more so when you are suffering from a chronic illness. Try to eat several small meals each day filled with healthy whole foods. Avoid processed foods as these typically contain many additives that can increase inflammation and therefore increase your pain. While there are certain foods that are best avoided overall, you will best learn what foods you need to avoid through trial and error – or by doing an elimination diet.

What is an elimination diet?

An elimination diet involves eliminating certain foods that may be bothering you for a period of time (usually at least 30 days). Once the food has cleared your system you attempt to reintroduce it and monitor how it makes you feel. It is best to eliminate all foods that may be bothering you at one time, avoid them for the elimination period, then reintroduce the foods slowly, one at a time, over the course of several days or weeks. The Whole 30 Diet is a great approach to this process. It works by eliminating all of the foods that may be causing harmful symptoms for a period of 30 days and then allowing you to reintroduce foods you miss one at a time. If the food doesn’t bother you when you reintroduce it, you can keep it in your diet; if it does, it’s best to continue without it.

Foods to Avoid

**Gluten** – While most doctors seem to believe that as long as you don't test positive for Celiac or Chron’s disease that you don’t need to worry about removing gluten, more and more people are finding, through personal experience, that gluten has a negative effect on their health. It is possible that gluten may not even show up on a food sensitivity panel, yet it may still have negative effects on your health. Gluten sensitivity can cause a variety of problems from fatigue, to digestion issues, and even pain. I’ve personally found that when I eat gluten the next day I will have a pain and fatigue flare.

**MSG** (Monosodium Glutamate) is naturally found in some foods, such as seaweed, which is why it is most commonly associated with Chinese food. However, MSG can be found in almost all processed foods. MSG is a food additive that was created to improve the taste of certain foods, specifically for those eating MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) in the military, and the elderly who have lost much of their ability to taste. MSG acts to stimulate the appetite. Its addition to our food has encouraged us all to eat more, and has greatly added to the obesity problem. In addition to encouraging us to eat more, MSG has a number of side effects including headaches, pain, fatigue, and nausea.
Processed Foods – If food is processed it likely has gluten in it, and if it doesn’t have gluten it has MSG, but there’s a good chance that it has both. There are many chemicals that are used in processed foods that cause dangerous side effects. Processed foods are also typically high in added sugars and other unnatural additives that can worsen symptoms of Fibromyalgia.

Aspartame – Aspartame is most commonly found in diet drinks and “sugar-free” foods. It has been found to cause headaches, and Parkinson’s-like tremors, as well as increased inflammation and pain. Aspartame stimulates your nerves, which increases neuropathic pain that is common in Fibromyalgia. If all of that isn’t enough, Aspartame and other sugar substitutes trick your body into thinking it is getting sugar but doesn’t provide it leaving your body wanting more and more sweet foods (Hartwig & Hartwig, 2012).

Processed Sugar – Speaking of sugar, when choosing a sweetener opt for raw sugar over the processed white stuff. Also, avoid High Fructose Corn Syrup and other processed sugars that can increase your blood sugar and lead to the post-sugar “crash” that will only increase your fatigue.

Yeast – Many of those with Fibromyalgia suffer from Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS). Yeast can greatly increase the symptoms of IBS, as well as cause system-wide issues throughout your body. Yeast feeds off of the sugar in your body, so combining the two can lead to serious issues with yeast infections.

Nightshades – Nightshades are a group of plants that include tomatoes, eggplants, and peppers. These plants have been known to increase inflammation in the body, which leads to increased pain. If you have problems with inflammation and pain it is best to avoid these (Hartwig & Hartwig, 2012).

Tip: Fresh juice is a great way to get the nutrients of many fruits and vegetables without having to eat them all. When juicing it's better to juice veggies and eat fruit. The fiber in fruit helps balance the high amount of sugar and keeps your body from absorbing too much sugar too fast (upsetting your blood sugar levels).

Dairy – Dairy is a major contributing factor to IBS. Dairy contains three components that many people have issues with. Lactose is the most common one and you can now find some lactose-
free dairy products. However, casein and whey are the proteins found in milk and many people find that they are sensitive to these proteins. Casein and whey sensitivity can not only cause digestion issues but can lead to fatigue, and increased pain (Hartwig & Hartwig, 2012).

Foods to eat

Once you go through the list of foods to avoid it can feel like there’s nothing left to eat, but that is so far from the truth. It can take a bit to adjust your diet and get used to a new healthy lifestyle, but once you do you will likely find that you rarely miss the foods you’ve removed. So, what should you eat?

1. Stick to whole foods – Not the store, although Whole Foods (the store) can be a great place to shop when you start eating healthy. Stick to whole meats, vegetables, and fruits. Cook them any way that you enjoy them, or eat them raw if you prefer. Protein is your energy source so it’s important that you get enough of it. You can get protein through both meat and plant sources. Quinoa is a great substitute for many other grains and it’s much higher in protein. Healthy carbs help fill you up and keep you full longer. So load up on the salad. Veggies are also excellent sources of many of the vitamins and minerals that you need. Leafy greens and broccoli are great sources of Vitamin C (to help boost your immune system), magnesium, and calcium (Murray & Trillium Health Products, 1997). Instead of a brownie opt for some fruit to satisfy your sweet tooth. Remember, a balanced meal will be 2/3 veggies and 1/3 meat.

2. Eat good fats – While you should avoid trans fats & fried foods, fat itself is not a bad thing. You want to increase the good fats found in nuts, coconut oil, olive oil and even meat. Increase Omega 3, which can be found in wild caught salmon, & walnuts, as well as in fish oil supplements (Hartwig & Hartwig, 2012).

3. Boost immunity – It’s important to keep your immunity levels up, and you can do this by increasing your intake of Vitamin C through fruits and vegetables. In addition to citrus fruits, which most people know are high in vitamin C, leafy greens, and pineapple are also great sources. You can also give yourself a boost by taking Emergen-C supplements on a regular basis (University of Maryland Medical Center, 2013).

4. Use natural anti-inflammatories – There are many excellent anti-inflammatories. When you juice or eat pineapple don’t discard the core. It is has the highest concentration of the chemical Bromelain, a natural anti-inflammatory. Prickly pears are another fruit that works as a natural anti-inflammatory. However, the seeds make it difficult to eat, so it’s best to juice (Murray & Trillium Health Products). Ginger and Turmeric are also excellent natural anti-

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**Immunity Booster Juice**

- 2 Cups Pineapple
- 1 Orange
- 1 Banana
- 1 in Fresh Ginger
- ½ C Strawberries

Juice everything except the banana. Blend banana and juice together. Enjoy.
inflammatories. Curcumin is found in Turmeric and can be purchased as a supplement for inflammation (Turmeric (Curcumin)).

5. Heal the Gut – When you’ve spent most of your life eating foods that aren’t so good for you, it’s important to take some time to work on healing your gut. Probiotics are an important part of this process. Probiotics are the good bacteria that live in your stomach. It’s important that the good bacteria outweigh the bad bacteria to keep your stomach working properly and to avoid yeast infections in the gut. Probiotics supplements are available at any nutrition store, but there are also many natural sources of pre and probiotics. These include fermented foods and drinks such as kombucha, Kimchi, saurkraut, and Kefir, as well as yogurt (Hartwig & Hartwig, 2012).

Other natural gut healers include aloe juice, which works to heal your body inside just as it does outside. Mix the aloe juice with apple juice to improve the taste. Ginger and peppermint are excellent for nausea, indigestion, and heartburn. Long term use of ginger can cut down or eliminate acid reflux issues. Red cabbage is also great for healing the gut and improving digestion, as well as helping to detox the liver.

It can be overwhelming to think of all the steps you can take to improve your diet, but you don’t have to do them all at once. Remember that any step in the right direction is a positive one. Consider small steps like first eliminating the bad foods from your kitchen, and introducing positive alternatives. The Whole 30 has a great process for helping walk you through the steps towards eliminating the bad and finding out which foods negatively affect you. The 30 day process gives you a light at the end of the tunnel if you find that you have a hard time giving up certain foods, you know it’s just for 30 days. Of course, you may find that you don’t miss some things as much as you thought you did. Or, you may find that when you reintroduce those foods...
they bothered you more than you thought. It’s amazing how easy it is to give up certain foods when you know that the costs outweigh the benefits (Hartwig & Hartwig, 2012).
Nutritional Supplements

I’m often asked what supplements and vitamins I take that help with my Fibromyalgia symptoms, and I’m always happy to share. However, it’s important for each of us to remember that we are individual. What works for me may not work for you. The dosage that I take my not be right for you. Below I will list several supplements and vitamins that have been found to relieve symptoms of Fibromyalgia. I urge you to discuss these with your doctor before you take them. Have a conversation about correct dosages and which supplements are right for your situation.

**Magnesium** plays a role in over 300 processes in the body (Magnesium Fact Sheet for Health Professionals, 2013), including maintaining homeostasis of vitamin D and Calcium. Magnesium is required for proper nerve and muscle function, energy production, temperature regulation, creating neurotransmitters (including serotonin), and relaxing muscles (Dean, 2007). Magnesium deficiency can lead to a variety of symptoms, beginning with muscle twitches, cramps, soreness, tension, over-stimulation, constipation, menstrual cramps, fatigue, numbness, tingling, insomnia, and headaches.

Magnesium is found widely in plant-based foods, especially green leafy vegetables. Almonds are one of the best sources of Magnesium (Magnesium Fact Sheet for Health Professionals, 2013). There are a variety of magnesium supplements available, in many different forms and combination. The most widely recommended forms for Fibromyalgia are Magnesium Citrate and Magnesium Malate. Magnesium Citrate is the most common form, but it can have a laxative effect (Dean, 2007). Magnesium Malate combines magnesium with malic acid. Malic acid (malate) increases muscle endurance and enhances anaerobic capacity (Abraham & Flechas, 1992). Fibromyalgia patients have been indicated to have low levels of oxygen in the blood, and malic acid can help improve this as well as decrease the symptoms associated.

Magnesium is mostly found in the bones and tissue; therefore levels of magnesium are hard to measure. They are often measured via blood or urine tests, but these tests may not be accurate (Magnesium). Luckily, Magnesium is easily processed by the body and the risks associated with taking too much are limited to gastric discomfort by way of diarrhea. Therefore, it is suggested that the best way to determine the right amount of Magnesium to take is through trial and error, start with small doses and work your way up. If you begin have gastric discomfort reduce your dosage (Richards, 2011).

**Vitamin D** and Magnesium work together with magnesium aiding in the absorption of Vitamin D (Micronutrient Information Center). The primary source of vitamin D is direct sunlight; however, as people have begun to stay indoors more, and made more of an effort to use sunscreen, a large percentage of the population is now Vitamin D deficient. Other sources of
Vitamin D include certain fishes, and certain “Vitamin D fortified” foods; however, the body does not absorb Vitamin D through food as well as it does through sunlight (Vitamin D). Symptoms of Vitamin D deficiency include chronic musculoskeletal pain, and muscle weakness and fatigue (Jesus, Feder, & Peres, 2013). Long-term Vitamin D deficiency can eventually lead to softening of the bones.

Some studies have shown a correlation between low levels of vitamin D and Fibromyalgia pain (Baygutalp, Baygutalp, Seferoglu, & Bakan, 2014). Vitamin D deficiency may be responsible for the abnormal pain processing, and sleep disturbances seen in Fibromyalgia. One study suggested that Fibromyalgia may somehow suppress activation of Vitamin D (Jesus, Feder, & Peres). According to the Mayo Clinic (2015) there is also a negative correlation between narcotic pain reliever intake and vitamin D; however, it is unclear if taking more narcotics reduces Vitamin D or if the patients have increased pain due to decreased Vitamin D and therefore need to take higher amounts of narcotics (Anderson, 2009). Overall, the evidence of whether there is a relationship between Fibromyalgia and Vitamin D is unclear, but since the majority of people in North America are Vitamin D deficient and the symptoms of Vitamin D deficiency coincide with those of Fibromyalgia, increasing Vitamin D intake could improve the symptoms of Fibromyalgia.

There are two forms of vitamin D available via supplement, D2 and D3. In general, these two forms are very similar; however, D3 has been found to be more potent at high levels. There are risks associated with excessive intake of vitamin D, including anorexia, heart arrhythmias, and potential damage to the heart and kidneys. Therefore, it is important to make sure that your doctor is aware of and monitoring your use of this supplement (Anderson).

**Vitamin B** encompasses eight distinct vitamins including thiamin (B1), riboflavin (B2), niacin (B3), pyridoxine (B6), and vitamin B12. B Vitamins can improve cognitive function and reduce the risk of depression. vitamin B12 is required for proper formation of red blood cells, as well as neurological function. Red blood cells are responsible for oxygenating the blood, and many with Fibromyalgia have been shown to have low blood oxygenation. Those with Fibromyalgia and other inflammatory diseases have a higher risk of Vitamin B deficiency due to chronic inflammation. A number of medications, including anti-inflammatories can also interfere with absorption of Vitamin B (Micronutrient Information Center).

B Vitamins are naturally found in a number of foods including fish, meat, poultry, and eggs. They are less abundant in plant based foods; however, some processed foods (such as cereals) are often fortified with B12. Vegetarians and individuals with gastric disorders such as Celiac disease are at higher risk for Vitamin B deficiency (Vitamin B12 Dietary Supplement Fact Sheet, 2011).

Symptoms of Vitamin B deficiency include anemia, fatigue, weakness, weight loss, constipation, numbness and tingling of the hands and feet, depression, confusion, difficulty maintaining balance, confusion, and poor memory. Many of these symptoms coincide with common
Symptoms of fibromyalgia. Vitamin B deficiencies can be assessed through blood tests, then treated with oral supplements or with B12 injections (Vitamin B12 Dietary Supplement Fact Sheet, 2011).

Fish Oil has been shown to decrease systemic inflammation, relieve anxiety and depression and improve cognitive function. The Omega-3 fatty acids of fish oil are primarily found in fatty fish, such as salmon and tuna. However, most people do not eat enough of these fish to get the levels of Omega-3 that they need. Fish oil supplements are available in a variety of sources; you should look for those with the highest ratio of Omega-3 to Omega-6 (Laliberte, 2009). The University of Maryland Medical Center website (2013) suggests 1-2 capsules of Omega-3 per day. Fish oil is also a good source of Vitamin D.

Curcumin is one of the primary substances that makes up the turmeric root, it is also a natural anti-inflammatory. Turmeric is known primarily as a spice, often found in Indian food, and a primary component of curry. Curcumin is not only an excellent natural anti-inflammatory, but it may also protect against Alzheimer’s disease, gastric disorders, and certain kinds of cancers (Turmeric (Curcumin)). Curcumin may also increase cellular glutathione levels, which play a critical role in cellular stress reduction. Small studies have shown that the anti-inflammatory effects of Curcumin are comparable to taking non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (nSAID) (Curcumin).

Turmeric can obviously be obtained naturally by eating foods that contain turmeric, but you can also find a number of Curcumin or turmeric supplements on the market. While Curcumin is natural and safe for those who have previously had issues with NSAID ulcers, taking Turmeric in high doses may also cause ulcers. Turmeric is also available in topical formation; however, there is some risk of skin irritation (Turmeric (Curcumin)).

Valerian Root is an herb that is commonly used as a sleep aid. Studies indicate that with regular use it can help you fall asleep faster (Bauer B. A., 2015). Since the 16th Century it has been used to treat insomnia, as well as anxiety, headaches, gastrointestinal spasms, and heart palpitations. Results of scientific studies have been inconclusive. Patients in these studies typically report falling asleep faster and better sleep quality; however, other measures seem to indicate that the patients’ sleep was not improved. One study indicated that it may take up to 28 days for Valerian Root to fully improve sleep. Valerian Root does have side effects that include headaches, gastrointestinal discomfort, dizziness, and an increase in morning sleepiness. This is a supplement that may work for some, but not for all. Valerian Root should not be taken in conjunction with any other medications that cause sedation (Valerian Fact Sheet for Professionals, 2013).

Melatonin is a hormone that acts in your natural sleep-wake cycle. It typically kicks in as light decreases. Changes in your natural sleep pattern, or hormonal issues may affect melatonin’s ability to properly tell your body that it is time to sleep (Bauer B. A., 2014). While many people report that melatonin helps them sleep better, this has not been confirmed by scientific studies.
(Melatonin, 2015). A 2014 study by de Zanette, et al. showed that melatonin when combined with amitriptyline (an anti-depressant) significantly reduced pain. Another study indicated that taking melatonin along with Prozac significantly improves patient-reported symptoms including fatigue, depression, and anxiety (Hussain, Al-Khalifa, Jasim, & Gorial, 2011). Unfortunately, melatonin supplements can have a number of side effects including nightmares, headaches, dizziness, confusion, and feelings of depression. It can also interact with a number of different medications, so it is best to talk to your doctor before taking a melatonin supplement (Melatonin, 2015).

**Probiotics** are the good bacteria that live in your stomach; they aid in maintaining the health of your digestive system. Keeping a good balance of the good and bad bacteria in your body helps maintain your health. When you take antibiotics you not only kill the bad bacteria but also the good. Too much sugar in your diet can also cause the bad bacteria to grow and create an imbalance in your system. Taking probiotics helps increase the good bacteria and keep you healthy. Probiotics occur naturally in fermented foods such as kimchi, yogurt, and kefir, but you can also take probiotic supplements. Digestive issues may occur when you first begin supplementation as the bad bacteria in your system die off (DiLonardo).

**Zinc** is a trace element naturally found in the body. Zinc aids in wound healing, thyroid function, and proper functioning of the immune system. Zinc occurs naturally in high protein foods such as meat and fish. Zinc deficiency can cause a number of side effects including increased infections, slow healing, loss of hair, decreased sense of smell and taste, irritability, nausea, and tinnitus (Evert, 2013). A 2008 study by Sendur and colleagues indicated that Fibromyalgia patients had decreased levels of both Zinc and magnesium. Zinc is considered safe in dosages up to 40mg per day; however side effect, including nausea and vomiting, may occur (Zinc).

There are many other supplements and vitamins that may help some Fibromyalgia symptoms. It is important that you talk to your doctor before adding any new supplement or vitamin to your regimen.
Pacing
Pacing is possibly your greatest ally in avoiding the roller coaster of pain and fatigue that is often associated with Fibromyalgia. Pacing is simply the act of learning your limits and working with them. Instead of trying to complete large tasks, you focus on small tasks, and celebrate your accomplishments (as small as they may be). Often on good days we will do as much as we feel our bodies will allow, only to pay for it the next day. By learning to slow down and work in small chunks, we can actually preserve our energy and avoid the painful crash (Friedberg, Williams, & Collinge, 2012). How do we do this?

- **Create a to-do list** that contains the tasks you want to complete. Once you’ve written down all of the tasks you want to do, ask yourself if you personally really need to do each of those tasks. Can you possibly delegate the task to someone else? Or, perhaps the task doesn’t really need to be done at all. If you decide that you must do the task, ask yourself if the task can be broken down into smaller chunks. For instance, if the task is to clean your office you could divide that into a number of smaller tasks including clean off your desk, clean the floor, and clean the windows.

- **Add one item to your to do list per day** and limit your work time to 15 minute intervals. Set a timer so that you do not work more than the 15 minutes. When the timer goes off rest for 15 minutes. After your rest period spend a moment to really evaluate how you feel. If you feel that you still have energy continue to work on your task (if you’ve not completed it). Continue with the 15 minute cycles until you find that your body is telling you it is time to rest. When you assess your body and find that you are beginning to feel fatigued it is time to stop for the day.

- **Increase your time intervals gradually.** Over time you will be able to increase your work intervals, but do this slowly, adding only five minutes at a time, and remember to take breaks to rest for at least 15 minutes, and assess your body.

- **Celebrate the small accomplishments.** We do many small tasks each day that take our energy that we never give ourselves credit for. We don’t stop to think about the fact that we loaded the dishwasher as we walked through the kitchen, or that we put away a load of clothes. There are many things that we do automatically and we really don’t think about those. If you are exercising even for five minutes a day -that is an accomplishment. Celebrate these accomplishments by adding them to your to-do list after you’ve done them (and don’t forget to mark them off). You’ll be amazed at just how much you really are doing each day.

- **Enjoy interaction.** Using time-based pacing in this way can be helpful for more than just increasing work and exercise activity. You can use this same technique to get out and enjoy time with friends again. If you find that spending time around others is draining your energy, set a time limit. Even if it’s just 15 minutes it’s 15 minutes more than you would have had before. By using this pacing method you can slowly increase your time around others, and doing other social and fun activities that you’ve been missing including crafting, playing with your kids, gardening, and others. Just remember to set time limits and take breaks. Remember that it’s these enjoyable activities that help us reduce stress, which can reduce pain.

Working in this way will allow you to learn how long your body can work before it is ready to stop. Eventually, you may be able to add more items to your to-do list for a single day; however, there will be days when your energy level will surprise you. When you wake up and find your energy is low, don’t fight it. Take a rest day and feel confident that by allowing yourself to rest without fighting it you will have more energy tomorrow.
Conclusion

Fibromyalgia is a misunderstood disorder, even among those who have lived with it for years. Fibromyalgia sufferers can often have months or years without any pain only to have it return for no apparent reason. New issues or pains can develop and doctors can’t seem to provide good answers for any of it, leaving patients not only in pain but frustrated. If you suffer from Fibromyalgia it is important to know that you are not alone. There are great support groups online even when you can’t find one locally. It helps to reach out to others who “get it” and who can let you know that that new symptom is nothing to get too concerned about, it’s all just part of “Fibromyalgia.”

Through a combination of finding a good doctor, working with medications, diet, exercise, and alternative options, and learning to pace yourself, you can learn to live with Fibromyalgia. You cannot only learn to live again, you can learn to thrive again. While you will likely never see your old “normal” life again, you will find a new normal that allows you to enjoy life, enjoy time with your family and friends, and feel accomplished again.

For more on living with Fibromyalgia check out my blog at CountingMySpoons.com, where each week I share stories of other Fibro Warriors just like yourself, tips to inspire and promote healthy living, as well as detailed reviews of medical studies so that you can better understand your illness.
References


Someone told me

you needed an extra spoon

http://countingmyspoons.com