

Overview - Fibromyalgia

Around one in 20 people in the UK have fibromyalgia, a chronic, long-term condition which causes pain in the muscles and ligaments. It often occurs in conjunction with illnesses associated with compromised immune systems (such as ME and inflammatory conditions). Fibromyalgia can be triggered by stressful events, both physical and mental.

The pain has been described as flu-like, burning, throbbing, aching, or stabbing. This is a variable condition with individuals experiencing levels of pain from mild to incapacitating, good and bad days. There is no cure at present and treatment – medication, talk therapy and lifestyle changes - focuses on alleviating symptoms and supporting individuals to pace themselves effectively.

Students with fibromyalgia may experience the following:

- Good days and bad days affecting attendance, participation and achievement in academic tasks.
- Fatigue and difficulty sleeping.
- Pain commonly in the neck, shoulders, back, and hips which is often worse in the mornings.
- A cycle of pain, fatigue, anxiety and depression leading to irritability and distress.
- Poor muscle tone due to a lack of physical activity.
- Headaches, nervousness, numbness, dizziness, and intestinal disturbances.
- Difficulty sustaining academic activity for extended periods with the possibility of studies being temporarily interrupted.
- Mental haziness, which affects memory and concentration.



Top tips for teaching students with fibromyalgia:

- Be aware this is a hidden disability: the student may look well but be in severe pain.
- Be flexible about attendance and participation – a student may struggle to get in for morning sessions, perform poorly in tutorials and seminars if 'brain fogged' or need to take a break from an extended activity to rest.
- Support the student to record notes of seminars and tutorials to counter concentration and memory problems.
- Make adjustments to support the student in physically demanding tasks.
- Provide comfortable seating and be understanding of the student's need to stand and stretch.
- Avoid last minute changes to taught session venues and times, and allow students plenty of time to move between sessions.
- Be aware that a student's irritability and distress may be due to their condition.
- If the student is struggling with academic tasks because of health-related issues, ask him/her what would be helpful.

Useful links

- <http://www.fmauk.org/2-uncategorised/52-what-is-fibromyalgia>
- <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/fibromyalgia>
- <https://painuk.org/members/charities/fibromyalgia-action>

