

Managing Fibromyalgia with Exercise

Who is this handout for?

This handout is for adults who have been diagnosed with fibromyalgia. Fibromyalgia is the most common cause of chronic, widespread pain in the United States. There is no “cure” for fibromyalgia, however there is a lot known about what works and what doesn’t work for managing symptoms.

What works to help fibromyalgia symptoms?

Exercise! The best treatment for fibromyalgia is exercise. Many different types of exercise can help, so pick an exercise program that works for you. Talk to your doctor or healthcare provider about whether it is safe for you to begin an exercise program.

It’s easy to overdo it! Start with a small amount of exercise each week and slowly build up to the goals used in the research studies.

Type of Exercise	Goals used in research studies
Aerobic or “cardio” exercise	60 min, at least twice weekly, gradually work up to 40 min of aerobic training within the 60-minute workout (60-70% of estimated maximum heart rate)
Swimming without a flotation device	50 min, 2-3 times weekly
Tai Chi	1-2 hour-long classes weekly, plus 30-minutes of daily individual practice
Walking	Increasing steps per day by 1,000 to gradually increase by 5,000 additional steps/day (medical research on walking is weaker than for aerobic exercise, swimming, or Tai Chi, but may be easier to achieve for beginners)

What about using opioid medications along with exercise?

Patients with fibromyalgia have widespread, or total body, pain. However, **opioid medications**, such as morphine, hydrocodone, or oxycodone, **have not been shown to help** patients with fibromyalgia and may even make things worse. One study showed that patients who increase their walking steps by 1,000 steps per day had overall improvement in their fibromyalgia symptoms. However these benefits were only seen in patients *not* using opioids. These medications also have serious risks, including substance use disorder.

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What is Tai Chi?

Tai Chi is a gentle form of mind-body exercise involving slow, focused movements that are accompanied by deep breathing. Tai Chi is different from yoga. Both use movements and meditation, however Tai Chi focuses on movements from one posture to the next while yoga focuses on being still during postures.

How do I begin a Tai Chi program?

The study that showed Tai Chi to be effective for fibromyalgia included more than basic Tai Chi. The study required people to practice 30 minutes each day on their own in addition to taking 1-hour classes once or twice each week with a trained instructor. Start slowly and gradually increase the amount you do over time, as it is easy to overdo it.

Format	Description	How do I get this?
Local, "live" classes	Age Well Vermont offers free "Tai Chi Basic" classes with locations throughout Chittenden, Addison, and Rutland Counties. Patients under 60 years old may take classes. Look for a "gentle," "basic," or beginner class when you register.	https://www.agewellvt.org/services/wellness or call 1-800-642-5119
Video (DVD)	Tai Chi for Arthritis - 12 Lessons with Dr. Paul Lam (2009) Although fibromyalgia is not the same as arthritis, the intensity of the exercises is probably a good level for patients with fibromyalgia. The DVD costs about \$30.	https://www.amazon.com/Tai-Chi-Arthritis-Lessons-Paul/dp/0980357314
YouTube	YouTube offers a number of free individual videos and channels related to Tai Chi. Examples of channels include Rich Marantz and My Simple Steps. Be very careful to select videos that are at a basic level or are designed for people with arthritis or fibromyalgia.	Example Videos • https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cEOS2zoyQw4 • https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZxcNBejxIzs

Note: The Vermont Academic Detailing Program does not earn money or have any conflicts of interest with these resources. Talk to your doctor or healthcare provider about whether it is safe for you to begin an exercise program.

Where can I find more information?

Ask your doctor or healthcare provider any specific questions you have.

- American College of Rheumatology: <https://www.rheumatology.org/I-Am-A/Patient-Caregiver/Diseases-Conditions/Fibromyalgia>
- National Fibromyalgia Association: <https://www.fmaware.org/>
- MedlinePlus (the National Institutes of Health's Web site for patients, produced by the National Library of Medicine): <https://medlineplus.gov/fibromyalgia.html>

References for Medical Research Studies: •Fernandes G, et al. Swimming Improves Pain and Functional Capacity of Patients With Fibromyalgia: A Randomized Controlled Trial. Archives of physical medicine and rehabilitation 2016;97:1269-75. •Kaleth AS, et al. Does increasing steps per day predict improvement in physical function and pain interference in adults with fibromyalgia? Arthritis care & research 2014;66:1887-94. •Kim S, et al. Sustained Benefits of Exercise-based Motivational Interviewing, but Only among Nonusers of Opioids in Patients with Fibromyalgia. The Journal of rheumatology 2017;44:505-11. •Macfarlane GJ, et al. EULAR revised recommendations for the management of fibromyalgia. Annals of the rheumatic diseases 2017;76:318-28. •Sevimli D, et al. The effects of aquatic, isometric strength-stretching and aerobic exercise on physical and psychological parameters of female patients with fibromyalgia syndrome. Journal of physical therapy science 2015;27:1781-6. •Wang C, et al. Effect of tai chi versus aerobic exercise for fibromyalgia: comparative effectiveness randomized controlled trial. BMJ (Clinical research ed) 2018;360:k851.