

Fibromyalgia: Fact vs Fiction

Fibromyalgia is a term you might have come across quite a few times, especially if you or someone you know experiences unexplained pain, fatigue and other symptoms. With so much information (and misinformation) floating around, it's easy to get confused. One of the most common misconceptions is that fibromyalgia is an autoimmune disease. In this leaflet, we'll break down what autoimmune diseases are, what current research says about fibromyalgia, and address some of the myths that often confuse the picture.

WHAT IS AN AUTOIMMUNE DISEASE?

At its core, our immune system is like our body's security team. It's always on the lookout for harmful invaders, like viruses and bacteria, ready to defend us. But sometimes, this system gets a bit mixed up. Instead of just targeting the bad guys, it starts attacking our own body's cells. Think of it like a security guard who mistakenly thinks a friendly neighbour is a threat.

This mistaken attack by our immune system on our own body is what we call an autoimmune response. And when this happens repeatedly, leading to damage or dysfunction of certain organs or tissues, we term it an 'autoimmune disease'. There are many types of autoimmune diseases, each affecting different parts of the body. For instance, rheumatoid arthritis affects the joints, while multiple sclerosis impacts the nervous system.

CURRENT RESEARCH ON FIBROMYALGIA

Fibromyalgia is a bit of a medical mystery. Unlike conditions like rheumatoid arthritis or lupus, fibromyalgia doesn't show visible signs of inflammation in the body. Instead, it's characterised by widespread pain, fatigue, and a host of other symptoms that can vary from person to person.

For a long time, many in the medical community were baffled by fibromyalgia. Some even questioned its legitimacy as a real condition. Thankfully, with advancements in research, we now understand it better,

though many aspects remain under investigation.

One of the leading theories is that fibromyalgia is related to how the brain and spinal cord process pain signals. It's like the volume knob on pain perception is turned up too high. So, things that shouldn't hurt much (or at all) can feel quite painful to someone with fibromyalgia.

While some early studies explored the possibility of fibromyalgia being an autoimmune condition, most current research suggests otherwise. There's no

evidence to show that the immune system attacks the body's tissues in fibromyalgia as it does in autoimmune diseases. Moreover, fibromyalgia doesn't cause the joint deformities or organ damage that many autoimmune diseases do.

However, it's worth noting that fibromyalgia can coexist with autoimmune diseases. This overlap can sometimes lead to confusion in diagnosis and understanding. But it's crucial to remember that having one doesn't necessarily mean you have the other.

ADDRESSING MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

MYTH	Fibromyalgia isn't a real condition.
FACT	Fibromyalgia is very much a real and recognised medical condition. While it may have been misunderstood or even dismissed in the past, extensive research and patient experiences have solidified its legitimacy.
MYTH	Only women get fibromyalgia.
FACT	While fibromyalgia is more common in women, men can and do get it too. It's essential not to overlook or dismiss symptoms in anyone based on gender.
MYTH	Fibromyalgia is just about pain.
FACT	While pain is a primary symptom, fibromyalgia can also cause fatigue, sleep disturbances, cognitive difficulties (often referred to as "fibro fog"), and even mood disorders.
MYTH	It's all in your head.
FACT	Fibromyalgia is not a psychological condition, though it can have psychological effects. The pain and other symptoms are real and can be debilitating.
MYTH	If you have fibromyalgia, you shouldn't exercise.
FACT	While it might seem counterintuitive, regular, gentle exercise can help manage fibromyalgia symptoms. Activities like walking, swimming, or yoga can be beneficial, but it's essential to listen to your body and not overdo it.
MYTH	Fibromyalgia is an autoimmune disease.
FACT	Current research suggests that fibromyalgia is not an autoimmune disease. It doesn't show the typical signs of the immune system attacking the body's tissues.
MYTH	There's a one-size-fits-all treatment for fibromyalgia.
FACT	Fibromyalgia affects everyone differently, and what works for one person might not work for another. Treatment is often a combination of medication, therapy, lifestyle changes, and other interventions tailored to the individual.

Remember, understanding fibromyalgia is the first step towards managing it effectively. If you or someone you know is dealing with this condition, it's important to seek guidance from healthcare professionals who are familiar with the latest research and treatment options.

For more resources on fibromyalgia, please contact the professional who provided you with this leaflet.

Their details can be found below.

The information contained in this article is intended as general guidance and information only and should not be relied upon as a basis for planning individual medical care or as a substitute for specialist medical advice in each individual case. ©Co-Kinetic 2023

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