

Fibromyalgia, Irritable Bowel Syndrome and the problems that medical tests don't show up

Some problems are not caused by a structural illness. When you see your doctor with one of these problems, your doctor will make a diagnosis based on the pattern of your symptoms rather than from test results.

These “functional” problems are more common than you would think. Examples of this type of functional problem are fibromyalgia, tension headaches and a globus sensation in the throat (throat tightness). Other examples of functional problems are: some types of persistent pain after a painful problem such as sciatica or cervical brachialgia (a painful disc problem in the neck), non epileptic seizures (dissociative attacks), irritable bowel syndrome, non cardiac chest pain after a heart attack and excessive breathlessness in patients who have COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease).

Functional illness is not “all in your mind”. Rather, it affects the way that your brain understands the signals that it gets from your body. A software problem rather than a hardware problem. It is not your fault. You do not have direct control of the symptoms, but understanding the illness will usually make a big difference to how much the problem troubles you. And each problem can be much improved, and sometimes cured, by the types of treatment detailed below.

Knowing that there is nothing nasty behind your symptoms can really make a big difference. Our emotions, worries and problems can make bodily symptoms more troublesome. This can lead to muscle tension, adrenaline release and fast or deep breathing, which in turn causes more anxiety. On top of that; when we feel low, we are much more likely to focus on our bodily symptoms and worry about them more.

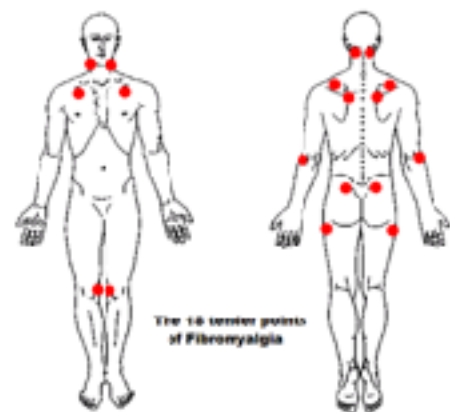
Understanding these patterns by keeping a diary can help. Particularly because it can show you that distraction with enjoyable activities helps. Slow breathing exercises, looking for solutions to some of your problems, and being more active help many. The best approach depends on the problem and on you. Dealing with negative thoughts and activity patterns through Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) will often make a big difference. Your doctor may also need to help you with anxiety, or depression, or other psychological problems. These emotional or psychological problems may prevent you from carrying out healthy habits and this will get in the way of you feeling better.

Fibromyalgia

Fibromyalgia is an example of a functional illness. 3-5% of people in the UK may have fibromyalgia in the UK. People with fibromyalgia have widespread pain. They also usually have a disturbed sleep pattern and are often tense, stressed or anxious. Low mood or depression may be a factor. The poor sleep pattern contributes to the pain, and may make depression and fatigue worse. “Fibro fog” can be an issue, where it is more difficult to think clearly.

One in 4 people with fibromyalgia get a decent amount of pain relief with a small dose of amitriptyline. Drowsiness with using amitriptyline is often helpful, but can be hazardous for certain patients. A dry mouth is a common side effect that can be limited by minimising the initial dose. Amitriptyline is not addictive, but some people are reluctant to use it, because it used to be used to treat depression. It is now used more to treat chronic pain and promote healthy sleep patterns.

There is a similar benefit in doing regular Tai chi. Twice weekly Tai Chi, for 1 hour over 12 weeks, seems to be very effective for pain, fatigue, quality of life, mood and sleep. There is some trial evidence that it halves many of these symptoms. There are no apparent risks. Continuing activity with a Tai Chi DVD is sensible.



Cognitive Behavioural Therapy is a good option for people who could do with changing their negative thinking, and the way that their thinking makes them behave. Six sessions of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy helped 1 in 4 participants compared to standard care. It is safe and often helpful for emotional health problems and dealing with negative thinking.

There is a poorly understood link between vitamin D deficiency and fibromyalgia. Studies have failed to show that vitamin D supplements help people who have long standing fibromyalgia. But it is reasonable to ensure that you have plenty of vitamin D. High dose supplements for 10 weeks from your doctor is a reasonable option followed by a regular over the counter supplement for vitamin D (Valupak vitamin D) when you can't get enough sunshine. If you don't get enough sunshine, or have dark coloured skin I suggest that you take supplements rather than having a vitamin D blood test.

If you would like some helping in deciding which option might work best for you: ask your doctor for support, or take a listen to this audio link: [Fibromyalgia options audio discussion](#)

Irritable Bowel Syndrome

Just because a problem is functional, does not mean that there are not treatments that can cure, or make a massive difference to, that functional problem. Irritable bowel syndrome, or IBS, is another example of a common functional problem. More than 10% of people in the UK are affected by IBS. Understanding irritable bowel syndrome can ease your symptoms. Knowing that it is not caused by a serious condition, such as cancer, can help enormously. Make sure that your doctor has ruled out coeliac disease (with a simple blood test). It's also helpful to know that it's not your fault, nor is it all in your mind. However, stress can make it worse, and tackling anxiety can improve it too.



The Low FODMAP diet helps 25% of people with irritable bowel syndrome. For this to work most people need to see a dietician. Cognitive behavioural therapy also helps 25% of people with IBS and hypnotherapy can help 30-50%.

Depending on your symptoms, there are some medications that are available over the counter (or on prescription), that you may like to try:

- Soluble fibre such as ispaghula can help to reduce IBS symptoms. 17% of people find it helpful - it is more likely to help if you're prone to constipation. This is available on prescription, or in oats, nuts and linseeds, and in some fruit and vegetables. (Check if the fibre is soluble or not.)
- Change your eating habits. Eat as regularly as possible. Avoid eating too much fruit, caffeine, and avoid sorbitol in sugar-free gum and drinks (sweeteners). Try yoghurt's containing probiotics. Increase your exercise levels (an app on your phone or a pedometer might help). These changes can also help you to lose weight and help to lower your cholesterol.
- If pain is a problem - this often feels like spasms or bloating - consider using: Peppermint oil. 40% of people find Peppermint oil helpful; Hyoscine (buscopan) helps in 30%. You can either take these regularly, if you get pain most days, or just when you get pain.
- Drugs that work on nerves, to reduce pain and gut movement, can help. For example: amitriptyline 5 to 30 mg works for 25% of people. It may also help you to sleep.
- Loperamide may help if diarrhoea is a problem.
- Avoid lactulose in constipation.

As you can see: it is not always easy to figure out, on your own, which treatment might work best for you. If you would like some helping in deciding which option might work best for you: ask your doctor for support, or take a listen to this audio link: [IBS options audio discussion](#)