

# How Physical Therapy Eases Fibromyalgia Pain

**Exercise can help you manage fibromyalgia pain, and physical therapy is a great *and safe way to get the exercise you need. Here's how to get started.***

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If you deal with the aches and pains of **fibromyalgia**, the thought of beginning an exercise program may make you cringe. In the long run, however, it can do you a world of good. Consider this: Physical therapy has helped many fibromyalgia patients get active and manage their fibromyalgia pain at the same time.

Anne Reicherter, PT, DPT, PhD, a licensed physical therapist and associate professor in the department of physical therapy in the School of Medicine of the University of Maryland in Baltimore, says physical therapy can help fibromyalgia patients “manage their daily living with less pain and generally make life more enjoyable.” She explains that people with fibromyalgia pain are often caught in a vicious cycle: Pain and fatigue prevent them from being active and exercising, but inactivity can trigger more pain and fatigue.

Another benefit of proper exercise? It’s one way to help you get restful, restorative sleep every night. And good sleep benefits fibromyalgia patients, as **sleep disturbances** are a common fibromyalgia symptom. Working with a physical therapist can help you get the exercise you need for a good night’s rest. Reicherter says physical therapy can also eventually reduce the need for pain medication, and possibly even surgery.

Fibromyalgia patients may find it hard to start an **exercise program** on their own because they fear it will make their symptoms worse. By having a physical therapist tailor a gentle, yet effective program with your particular pain and fatigue levels in mind, you can eliminate the hard part — getting started.

## Physical Therapy Options for Fibromyalgia Relief

Increasing flexibility and strengthen muscles through a maintainable exercise routine are two important ways physical therapists reduce fibromyalgia pain and make life more manageable.

Options include:

- **Stretching.** By increasing flexibility through stretching, tight, stiff muscles loosen up, providing fibromyalgia relief. Your physical therapist can instruct you on the proper way to stretch muscles, tendons, and ligaments. The National Pain Foundation recommends keeping the number of repetitions low — 5 to 10. Holding a stretch for 30 to 60 seconds is good for large muscle groups, with possibly only one to two reps necessary.

- **Aerobic exercise.** Low-speed and low-impact activities are best, says Reicherter. Stationary bicycles and elliptical machines are usually less stressful on the joints.
- **Aqua therapy.** Swimming and other water exercises are excellent for fibromyalgia patients. Says Reicherter, “The buoyancy of the water can lessen stress on muscles and joints and improve flexibility.” A heated pool may be especially beneficial because the heat can soothe sore muscles.

### **More Ways to Relieve Fibromyalgia Pain**

Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) stimulates nerve fibers and can decrease fibromyalgia pain. Reicherter says TENS helps:

- Block pain signals to the spinal cord
- Release the body’s own natural pain-killing chemicals
- Improve local circulation and gently contract muscles for healing and relaxation

Reicherter also recommends massage, saying it is helpful in relieving muscle spasms or soreness, but is best used in combination with stretching, strengthening, conditioning exercises, and lifestyle modification, rather than as a standalone therapy.

### **Choosing the Right Physical Therapist for Your Fibromyalgia Pain**

The American Physical Therapy Association provides these tips for **choosing a physical therapist**:

- **Check for a license.** It’s important that your physical therapist is licensed in your state. If you are receiving therapy from an assistant, make sure he is supervised by a licensed physical therapist.
- **Get a referral, if needed.** Most states allow you to find a therapist without a physician referral, but it’s best to double check.
- **Ask questions about insurance.** Is your physical therapist in your insurance company network? Will this person submit claims for you? Do you have a co-pay, and how much is it? Work out all the money questions before you start your therapy.

Some fibromyalgia patients say they feel worse after starting therapy, but Reicherter says this should not happen if you are getting good therapy and are going slowly. Overdoing exercise or activities after you start to feel better can make you feel worse. Reicherter also points out that exercise soreness is different from fibromyalgia pain. Once you get used to the exercise, you should start reaping its benefits: less pain every day. Source: APTA (American Physical Therapy Association)