

10 Ways to Manage Fibromyalgia at Work

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If you have fibromyalgia, the pain, stiffness and fatigue can be especially hard to handle during a long work day. Read these expert tips to hold your own with fibromyalgia at work without exhausting your sick leave...

Amy L. Szymanski constantly battled fatigue and muscle soreness when she was at work, making it difficult to get through the day.

Because of her condition, “I regularly feel like I’m coming down with the flu,” says the Atlanta resident.

And that’s when her fibromyalgia symptoms are mild. During severe flares, Szymanski has trouble concentrating and paying attention to details – which led to making mistakes on the job.

“I had to excuse myself, saying, ‘I’m not feeling well today.’ I eventually depleted my sick and vacation time. The worry led to increased stress, which then worsened my fibromyalgia.”

If you’re like Szymanski, you also may have a tough time handling fibromyalgia at work. The chronic disease can be discouraging. “Not only do women have the typical on-the-job pressures and stress, they also worry about their fibromyalgia symptoms costing them income,” says gynecologist Elizabeth Lyster, M.D., a fibromyalgia specialist at the Holtorf Medical Group in Foster City, Calif.

“But there are ways to manage fibromyalgia at work,” Dr. Lyster says.

Here’s how to beat fatigue, sidestep stress and soothe sore, stiff muscles from 9 to 5 and beyond.

1. Stay rested.

What you do the night before a work day has a big impact on the job. But sleep is one of the hardest things for a fibromyalgia patient to come by.

That’s because pain and stiffness can make it difficult to get comfortable, while worrying about the condition can turn restful dreams into restless nightmares. “Sleep is one of the most important tools to manage fibromyalgia symptoms,” says Stephen Soloway, M.D., a rheumatologist in Vineland, N.J.

Make sure you stick to a regular bedtime routine, he says.

“Going to sleep at the same time every night helps your body fall into a natural sleep/wake rhythm,” he says. This can also help you get just the right amount of zzz’s – about eight hours per night.

“Too much can make it tough to get to sleep the next night,” he says. “And less than that can leave you feeling sluggish in the morning.”

If necessary, it’s OK to make occasional use of natural sleep aids or a doctor-prescribed sleep medication, he says.

(For more tips, read our article [Losing Sleep Over Fibromyalgia?](#))

2. Dress for the office climate.

“Cold can trigger inflammation, which increases pain and stiffness,” Dr. Lyster says.

Even shivering can cause pain if you have fibromyalgia, she says.

So keep a sweater or wrap at work for days when you’re feeling especially cold, or when the air conditioner is blowing too hard.

“Wear lightweight fabrics and dress in layers so you can stay comfortable no matter what the temperature,” Dr. Lyster says. That way, you can add or subtract items as needed.

3. Cushion your feet.

Comfortable footwear can make a big difference. “Slip into sneakers or similar shoes whenever possible – like when you’re at your desk. They’ll keep your feet warm but properly supported,” says Amy Rice, an administrator and physical therapist at the Center for Pain Management in Indianapolis, Ind. Ballet flats with an insert for extra arch support (in case you have to walk around the office) help you look on-trend while being kind to your feet.

If your job requires that you stand for several hours, take “sit” breaks to rest your legs and back, Rice suggests.

And, if possible, stand on an ergonomic, or anti-fatigue, mat that absorbs some of the shock for an extra layer of cushioning.

4. Take regular breaks.

If you spend much of your day sitting behind a desk, take regular “movement breaks,” Dr. Lyster advises.

“Change positions or stand up before you start experiencing pain,” she says.

If you can comfortably sit for 30 minutes, get up from your desk and take a short break every 20 minutes. “This can help you break the cycle of working for hours [at a time] when you feel good, only to have to lay down for a day or two because you overdid it,” Dr. Lyster says.

If you wait till you’re feeling stiff to move around or change positions, it’s too late – “your muscles are already inflamed and aggravated,” she adds. **5. Stretch your muscles.**

“Stretching helps ease the tension and stiffness in your muscles caused by fibromyalgia at work,” Dr. Lyster says.

You should lightly stretch 3-4 times per day, “or whenever you feel stiff,” says Melissa Gutierrez, a yoga instructor in New York City.

“Some simple modified yoga poses can help prevent your muscles from getting tight, whether you sit or stand all day at work,” she says. This modified Downward-Facing Dog pose, which makes use of a wall in your office, can help you stretch out your stiff back as well as core (abdominal) muscles, hips and thigh muscles, Gutierrez says.

- Start by facing a wall, standing about three feet away.
- Stretch your arms out and lean toward the wall. Once your hands meet the wall, slide them down until they’re at waist height and your torso is parallel to the floor.
- Slide your feet back so they’re under your hips, creating a 90-degree angle.
- Push against the wall, stretch your back and breathe deeply. Hold long enough to take 1-2 slow, deep breaths.

6. Make your office fibro-friendly.

A few modifications to your workspace can help prevent fibromyalgia symptoms before they start.

“If you’re on the phone a lot, use a headset to prevent neck strain and discomfort,” Rice says. And make

sure your computer monitor is directly in front of you, at eye level, adds Dr. Lyster.

A Styrofoam wedge or other lumbar support positioned by your lower back may ease pain when sitting, Rice says.

“Keep both feet flat on the floor and position your chair so that your work surface is at elbow height,” she says.

7. Don't overdo things.

“You shouldn't push yourself to the brink of sheer exhaustion, where it feels like you want to collapse. That will increase the odds you'll be using a sick day the next morning,” Dr. Soloway says.

If you have a special project due and have to work long hours, you may need to have a heart-to-heart with your boss. “Explain that you're committed to the project, but need to pace yourself,” says Cheryl Rezek, a clinical psychologist in Gerrards Cross, England, who specializes in stress management.

Don't be afraid to ask for help or to take tasks home in order to lighten your work day, and take frequent breaks while accomplishing your tasks.

Remember to talk to your boss as soon as the project's assigned, even if you feel fine.

“You never know how you'll feel closer to the project's due date, so you shouldn't gamble on being symptom-free while you're working all those long hours,” Dr. Soloway says.

8. Rev up in the morning.

Start your day with a healthful breakfast geared toward sustaining energy – such as lean protein, oatmeal and fresh fruit, Dr. Lyster suggests.

And don't overdo the caffeine, notes Dr. Soloway. Stick to a single cup of coffee, and drink water to stay hydrated and alert throughout the day.

Then beat on-the-job fatigue by taking short breaks and changing your routine every hour or two.

“Take a walk around the office, do some light stretching or take a few slow, deep breaths to fill your lungs and blood with oxygen,” Dr. Lyster says. **9. Keep heat on hand.**

If your muscles get sore, 10 minutes of heat applied every hour will help relax and soothe them.

“A heating pad, heated rub or disposable, self-heating patch can provide short-term pain relief,” Rice says. Plus you can use it under your desk if needed.

She recommends an inexpensive microwaveable heating pad – “that's great for quickly spot-treating sore areas with heat.”

10. Manage your stress.

If left unchecked, stress can trigger fibromyalgia symptoms – even if what you're worried about is the condition itself, Rezek says.

“Stressing out about how your fibromyalgia is impacting your job, and whether your co-workers are questioning your abilities, leads to guilt over the possibility that you're letting them down,” Rezek says. That causes a vicious cycle of more guilt and stress.

Your support system can help you deal with the pressure caused by fibromyalgia at work, Rezek says.

“Talk to your family or a trusted friend, and vent about what's bothering you,” she says. “Don't keep things bottled up.”

*For more information, visit our [Fibromyalgia Health Center](#). **How Much Do You Know About Fibromyalgia?***

Described by Hippocrates in ancient Greece, fibromyalgia is one of the world's oldest medical mysteries. The disease – a complex illness marked by chronic muscle, tendon and ligament pain, fatigue and multiple

tender points on the body – affects about 2% percent of Americans, most of them women. How much do you know about fibromyalgia? [Take this quiz](#) and find out.

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