This condition has considerable consequences in the workplace. Patients with fibromyalgia are more likely to lose their jobs than people suffering from other conditions that cause fatigue. Indeed, an estimated 30 – 40% of patients have had to quit work or change jobs.

Fibromyalgia is characterized by chronic widespread musculoskeletal pain and tenderness associated with neuropsychological symptoms of fatigue and unrefreshing sleep, cognitive dysfunction, anxiety and depression.

Patients with fibromyalgia have increased prevalence of other pain states such as chronic fatigue syndrome, chronic headaches, temporomandibular joint disorder, irritable bowel syndrome, chronic pelvic pain and bladder disturbances.

The prevalence of fibromyalgia is estimated to be 2–3% and women with the condition outnumber men 9:1.

The patient with fibromyalgia presents with "pain all over" and severe functional limitations. Pain is severe and poorly localised and typically felt in all quarters of the body. Tender points to firm pressure or thermal stimuli are typically spread around the neck, chest, trapezii, interscapular region, gluteal and bilateral hips, elbows and knees.

Investigations are invariably normal. The diagnosis may be considered in patients who have had persistent symptoms for at least 3 months with no other explanation and whose presentation fits American College of Rheumatology (ACR) 2010 diagnostic criteria.

The diagnostic framework incorporates a widespread pain index (WPI) and somatic symptom (SS) score measured by fatigue, unrefreshing sleep and cognitive symptoms.

Treatment includes physical conditioning, cognitive behaviour therapy, anti-inflammatory and analgesic medication aimed at any triggering conditions, and antidepressant and anti-epilepsy medication aimed at neuropathic pathways.

Establishing Regular Sleep Routine is crucial to recovery. Emotional trauma or viral infections may trigger the more widespread condition via central nervous system factors.
but no one trigger has been proven to cause primary fibromyalgia.

Triggers may be inflammatory or degenerative conditions such as arthritis and tendinitis.

This raises the controversial question of fibromyalgia developing as a consequence of physical injury 4,5.

Fibromyalgia that on history has been “triggered” by specific musculoskeletal conditions or injuries that arose in the course of the person’s duties may arguably be work-related.

Importantly, an enhanced understanding of this disorder has led to effective treatment with better health outcomes and quality of life.6

4 Sukenik S., Abu-Shakra M., Flusser D. – Physical trauma and fibromyalgia – is there a true association? Harefuah. 2008 Aug-Sep;147(8–9):712–6, 749. [Article in Hebrew]

About the Author

Dr Bert Boffa has been a vocationally registered GP of 30 years’ standing with 15 years’ experience in public hospital administration and 18 years’ experience in private health insurance.

Dr Boffa obtained his MBBS through the University of Melbourne in 1980 and his MBA at Monash University in 1992. He became a Fellow of the Australian College Health Service Executives in 1994. In July 2013, Dr Boffa completed his training and was admitted as a specialist Occupational Physician (FAFOEM).

He is also a knowledgeable independent medical examiner and is highly experienced across the AMA guides. He conducts works site visits to track progress and aid return to work for injured workers. Dr Boffa has participated in the Return to Work and Motor Accident Commission accreditation for South Australia to conduct permanent impairment assessments. He is also accredited to conduct WorkSafe Victoria assessments.

Dr Boffa is also engaged in research and education, with a wide range of research interests that have resulted in a number of publications in International medical journals. Academic development and mentoring is also very important to Dr Boffa, through his separate academic appointments in Monash and Adelaide Universities.

Dr Boffa’s services are available through our Adelaide, Brisbane, Darwin, Melbourne and Launceston branches.

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