

Pilates and Fibromyalgia

Helping people with fibromyalgia (also known as fibromyalgia syndrome FMS) is something close to my heart as I have a family member who is bedridden with the condition.

FMS is a long term condition that causes pain all over the body. In addition to widespread pain, people with FMS may also suffer with,

- Increased pain sensitivity
- Fatigue
- Muscle stiffness
- Difficulties in sleeping
- Cognitive and memory problems, known as "fibro fog"
- Headaches
- Irritable Bowel Syndrome
- Temperature sensitivity

In many cases the condition is triggered by a highly stressful event such as an injury or infection, death of a loved one, giving birth or a relationship breakdown.

FMS affects 7 times more women than men and typically develops between the ages of 30-50, although it can occur in children and the elderly. It is unclear exactly how many people are affected by FMS but there are estimates of 1 in 20.

Previously it was thought that the condition was related to abnormal levels of chemicals in the brain and disruption in how the Central Nervous System processes pain, but recently scientists have revealed that the main source of pain stems from excess blood vessels in the hand. This potentially ground breaking discovery shows a direct link between these nerves and the widespread pain that those with fibromyalgia feel. It also explains the extremely painful hands and other tender points associated with FMS and why symptoms are worse in cold weather.

Dr Frank L. Rice, neuroscientist, states,
" This mismanaged blood flow could be the source of muscular pain and achiness and the sense of fatigue."

Of course, this announcement has many critics and so the treatment for FMS remains to be a combination of medication, counselling therapies and exercise.

Exercise in particular has been found to have benefits including pain reduction. A pilot study on the effects of Pilates training on people with fibromyalgia syndrome concluded that Pilates is an effective and safe method for people with FMS and observed a significant improvement in pain after a 12 week Pilates programme.

Another study by Mary Silva using MET showed a noted 50% or more decrease in pain levels in 60% of patients, a decrease in medication required and an increase in quality of life. (MET, muscle energy technique, includes gentle stretching with gentle contraction of that muscle)

Pilates exercises use this technique and is perfect as an exercise programme for other reasons,

1. Through it's individualised nature, Pilates allows the sufferer to work comfortably, with control and low reps. This is crucial as many sufferers fear that exercise will make the pain worse.



2. As a low impact programme Pilates can be modified to focus on gentle stretching, dynamic stability and proprioception.
3. The importance of breath and breathing techniques is incredibly beneficial as it oxygenates the blood, increasing circulation which will relax muscles and relieve undue tension.
4. Mindful movement- FMS sufferers tend to disconnect from their bodies, whereas Pilates emphasises the mind body connection which leads to a sense of well being and empowerment.

As with any programming for specific conditions, care needs to be taken and modifications need to be made as the condition has many variables. Focus should be on gentle stretching exercises combined with low level strengthening work and spinal articulation. Some appropriate modified Pilates exercises are,

- Standing footwork (supported if needed)
- Shoulder bridge (spinal articulation)
- Supine knee lifts, slides, drop outs
- Supine arm circles
- Prone single leg series
- Diamond press

References

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