Can Diet Help Manage Fibromyalgia Symptoms?

by STARLA RICH

A Fibromyalgia Diet for a Healthier, Happier You

Food – it is not just something that we need to survive, but it is a part of almost every social or business activity. Whether it is business lunches, client dinners, family gatherings, holiday parties, sports banquets, little league ballgames, date nights, friend outings, neighborhood bar-b-ques, picnics and so on – food brings people together.

There is a reason, why so much emphasis has always been on comfort food, gourmet “delectables” and colorful tabletops. Many people find themselves not just eating to live but living to eat! What we eat affects us in many ways and can make or break our overall health.

What Role Does Food Play in Fibromyalgia?

The nutritional neuroscientist Kathleen Holton, Ph.D., an assistant professor of health studies at the American University in Washington, DC, has researched the effects of a variety of dietary components and nutrients on the brain, and she’s developed specific guidelines to help people with fibromyalgia better manage their condition through what they eat.

"No drug on the market is as important to optimal health as a well-balanced and healthy diet," Dr. Holton says. *"While many people like to call nutrition 'alternative medicine,' in reality it is the basis of all human health. We can't be optimally healthy without giving our bodies the nutrients they need, and that applies to anyone with fibromyalgia."*

Along with my personal journey with fibromyalgia, I began taking notice of my flare-ups. I discovered that there was a flare-up trigger pattern that was, in part, connected to what I had eaten over the previous day and hours.

Today I want to point out the foods themselves – the best and the worst, and the importance of food and diet in our daily lives. So, let’s dive a little deeper discussing how diet plays a role in managing any weight gain that comes from a less active lifestyle due to fibromyalgia as well as the foods that provide nutrition that will help us better manage our fibromyalgia symptoms.

Fibromyalgia Weight Gain

A common problem observed in fibromyalgia is weight gain. Many patients complain that weight gain has become a major problem once diagnosed with FMS.

According to Dr. Kent Holtorf, M.D., a leading fibromyalgia specialist and founder of Holtorf Medical Group, San Francisco, *“We don’t know if fibromyalgia causes weight gain or vice versa.”* He goes on to say that *“fibromyalgia patients have a 25 percent lower metabolism, on average than someone without fibromyalgia of the same age and body weight.”*

That’s 500 fewer calories burned per day, the equivalent of a lean dinner. Some fibromyalgia medications also increase appetite. It is not unusual for a person to put on 25 to 30 pounds weight gain in the first year after fibromyalgia diagnosis.

Various factors are involved in weight gain and include:

Decreased Metabolism

As we just mentioned, metabolism is slowed down in those who have fibromyalgia. Various hormone changes can slow down metabolism. Studies have shown hormone deficiencies or imbalances (cortisol, thyroid, serotonin, growth hormone) in fibromyalgia. Insulin and other hormones are probably affected as well.

Dr. Leslie J. Crofford has described hormonal abnormalities in fibromyalgia and how they interfere with physiologic communication between the brain and the body. Closely linked with hormones is the autonomic nervous system. The autonomic nerves are the small nerves vital in the coordination of the body’s hormones, and thus they play a role in the regulation and delivery of nutrients to our cells.

Hypoglycemia (Abnormally Low Blood Sugar)

The hypoglycemic roller-coaster effect is a good example of the combination of hormonal endocrine imbalances and autonomic nervous system dysfunction leading to hypoglycemic symptoms.

Increased sensitivity to insulin will result in too much glucose being removed from the bloodstream and pushed into the muscle. All this extra glucose pushed into the muscles has nowhere to go as the muscles have very limited ability to store glucose.

The body is forced to go into a fat-storing mode where it converts this extra glucose into fatty tissue. A carbohydrate-rich diet causes weight gain by converting the extra glucose into fat, and if fibromyalgia causes more insulin activity and sensitivity, then the weight gain can be even greater.

Constantly Craving Sweets

Do you turn to comfort food packed with carbohydrates, refined sugars and sweets as a way to self-medicate against the pain of fibromyalgia?

These foods are the big culprits of pain, bloating and fatigue because they release insulin, which as we stated, packs on fat. Sugar often becomes addictive, making you crave even more.

A deficiency of vitamins or minerals, including B vitamins, magnesium, and chromium, may also cause food cravings and reduce your metabolism.

As a preventative measure, take a complete multivitamin to keep energy levels up. Ask your doctor to monitor vitamin levels and prescribe the necessary vitamins and minerals to combat possible deficiencies.

Also, cut out soft drinks, substitute fruit for sweets, and read labels carefully. Avoid ingredients ending in “-ose,” such as sucrose and fructose.

Lacking Understanding and Guidance on How to Eat Better

For many people, sticking with fruits and vegetables and eliminating processed foods reduces fibromyalgia symptoms.

Some experimentation is necessary because food sensitivities vary from person to person and can trigger or exasperate fibromyalgia symptoms. I recommend keeping a food journal of how you feel after eating certain foods to determine if there is a pattern of a flare-up, being triggered by certain foods.

Next page: Fibromyalgia diet advice, the best foods for fibromyalgia, and the worst foods for fibromyalgia.

Fibromyalgia Diet: What to Eat and Not Eat

If you want to stay flare-free, here are some ways you can prevent it with diet and dietary changes:

- Strip out all foods with preservatives or artificial colorings.
- A clean, all-natural diet helps you stay healthier.
- Replace sugars and artificial sweeteners with natural agave nectar or honey. Stick with hormone-free chicken and meats, grass-fed beef and organic fruits and vegetables.
- And drink plenty of water, which helps rid the body of toxins.
- A well-balanced diet can give you more energy to stay physically active and can potentially improve your overall health.

Below is a list of the best and worst foods for people with fibromyalgia.

Avoid Foods That Contain Added Glutamate

Glutamate is a neurotransmitter that occurs naturally in the body and in some foods, but it is also added to foods as a flavor enhancer.

The most common form of dietary glutamate is monosodium glutamate (MSG), which must be listed on the label when it’s included in foods.

Ingredients that include the terms "hydrolyzed,” “autolyzed,” “protein concentrate,” or “protein isolate” are also likely to contain naturally occurring monosodium glutamate.

Foods that commonly contain MSG include Chinese foods, canned soups and vegetables, some types of chips or crunchy snacks, and processed meats. To avoid MSG and other sources of added glutamate, read food labels carefully, and don’t buy those that list MSG or ingredients high in glutamate.

Choose Whole Foods Instead of Processed Ones

Processed foods typically have more additives and less fiber and nutrients than unprocessed foods. Refined carbohydrates — such as white flour, white pasta, and white rice — are examples of processed foods that have been stripped of naturally occurring nutrients.

When choosing carbohydrate-containing foods for your meals, choose whole grains such as quinoa, amaranth, whole wheat berries, buckwheat groats, or brown or wild rice, or have a sweet potato or plain potato in place of bread, pasta, or rice.

A few years into my battle with fibromyalgia, I began to cut out the “white stuff” from my diet – refined sugar (which we will discuss later in more detail), white flour, pasta, bread, and so on. I also steered away from processed foods and began buying whole foods and organics. The difference in the way I felt was stunning.

Think “Rich, Lean, Low, Whole”

Develop a diet rich in fruits and vegetables, lean proteins, whole grains, nuts, seeds, legumes, and low-fat or no-fat dairy foods.

Avoid Cured Meats

When you buy meat, avoid processed products with added salt or preservatives or meats that have been smoked

or cured. This list includes canned meat, sausage, bacon, hot dogs, ham, deli meat, corned beef, and beef jerky.

Also, beware of meat products with the words "natural flavor added" on the label. An example of such a product is turkey breast infused with broth (to give it more flavor). Natural flavors are derived from natural sources such as plants, meats, and seafood and may be high in naturally occurring monosodium glutamate.

Eat Cold-Water Fish and Fortified Foods for Vitamin D

You can get vitamin D naturally in swordfish, tuna, sockeye salmon, and eggs, and some foods, such as orange juice and milk, are fortified with vitamin D. Vitamin D can also be taken as a supplement or in cod liver oil, which provides both vitamin D and omega-3 fatty acids.

Choose Dark, Leafy Greens, Nuts, and Seeds for Magnesium

Magnesium is found in many healthy foods, including legumes (dried beans and lentils), nuts and seeds, avocado, yogurt, bananas, fatty fish, dark chocolate, and dark, leafy greens.

Add in Fish, Flaxseed, and Chia for Omega-3 Fatty Acids

Omega-3s are abundant in wild-caught seafood, walnuts, chia seeds, and flaxseeds. It can also be taken as a supplement.

However, omega-3 capsules are not recommended since they contain gelatin, which contains the amino acid aspartate. Aspartate may active a glutamate receptor on nerve cells that are implicated in fibromyalgia. Gelatin also contains glycine, a co-activator of that receptor.

Include Good Sources of Antioxidants in Your Meals

Look for foods that add color to your diet, specifically in the fruit and vegetable category. Bright red, green, orange, yellow, and purple hues to will give you an antioxidant boost.

Read the Labels on Packaged Foods

If the ingredients list on a food packaging label is long and complex, put the product back on the shelf, Holton advises. Labels should be short, easy to read, and should list ingredients that you could add to a dish when cooking.

Avoid Artificial Sweeteners and Limit Sugars

Avoid artificial sweeteners such as aspartame, acesulfame-K, saccharin, and sucralose. Use regular sugar or honey sparingly to sweeten foods. Even “regular sugar” or refined sugar is harmful to your health. Sugar increases inflammation in the body and saps energy. This one was a huge discovery for me. When I must use sugar, I use unrefined organic sugar that has a “sandy” color as opposed to the refined white sugar.

Dr. Horton states that *"as you cut back on sugar, you'll taste sweetness in foods more easily. Even Stevia is hundreds of times sweeter than sugar — which makes you want more sweetness in your food."*