Protect Against Sensory Overload This Fourth of July

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Fibromyalgia, July 4th and Sensory Overload

Fibromyalgia symptoms are notoriously widespread and difficult to predict. One minute you're doing fine, and the next you're fighting a wave of pain or a throbbing ache. In some cases, a host of sensory discomforts can come along with the pain, and that can pose a problem during big events.

Instead of dreading the bright lights and loud sounds of Independence Day festivities, get in on the action with appropriate coping techniques. Once you understand how and why your senses are affected, you can take steps to minimize the sensory overload.

How Fibromyalgia Affects Your Senses

Fibromyalgia affects your whole body, so it makes sense that a variety of stimuli can spark discomfort. Some experts suspect fibromyalgia causes changes not only in the pain center of the brain, but also in the way your mind processes general, everyday sensory experiences.

All of your senses can suffer, and it's not uncommon to experience sensations like:

- Numbness and tingling
- Sensitivity to smells and tastes
- Dry itchy eyes
- Burning sensation
- Sensitivity to bright lights
- Discomfort with loud sounds

Not surprisingly, the chances of sensory discomfort increases with big, celebratory events — especially when they involve fireworks. And since the intensity of your sensory discomforts will also determine the intensity of your fibro pain, it's vital you learn to control your physical reactions if you can't control your environment.

Stay Comfortable Throughout the Day

When it comes to preventing sensory overload, your first line of attack will be a medication that depresses the signals in the nervous system. Unfortunately, local creams or other topical therapy for individual discomforts won't have the thorough and lasting effects that you need.

Instead, consider a medication to alter the spinal cord's pain inhibitory system (like Cymbalta) or a drug that can limit the number of sensory signals that reach the nervous system (like Lyrica or Neurotonin).

Big events can mean long days, and that can bring fatigue and aching fibro pain along with the sensory overload. Prepare for a lengthy outing with some helpful accessories and approaches:

- **NSAIDs and gentle muscle relaxants.** Pack some pain medication to take care of any acute pains that may strike, but check with your doctor to ensure they will be safe and effective alongside the meds you are taking to stifle your overactive nervous system.
- **Take time to stretch and relax.** It's pretty easy to get wrapped up in the celebration, but stiff or exhausted muscles mean more aches and pains. Gentle stretches will help, so remind yourself to do some range of motion exercises here and there. Stand up and walk around a few times each hour, too.
- **Practice good posture.** A physical therapist can show you techniques to strengthen the muscles around your spine and keep your body aligned, so you don't put undue pressure on certain areas. Be aware of your posture, wherever you are and whatever you happen to be doing. Many patients and therapists find that better posture reduces the frequency of flare-ups.

You'll get more relief when you tailor your treatment to your own body and symptoms and that means you'll need to determine what situations are particularly uncomfortable for you. Before the big bash, consider going out to a busy park, restaurant or other busy event to see how your body handles the sensory stress.

If you can figure out what triggers and tames the discomfort now, you'll be better prepared for Independence Day.