

Cold weather hits fibromyalgia sufferers hard

31 January 2014, by Keith Herrell

Cold temperatures, such as those gripping the Midwest over the past week, are tough on everybody. But for individuals with fibromyalgia, whose symptoms include chronic, widespread pain, the big freeze is especially difficult to endure.

"It is very common for individuals with fibromyalgia to report worsening of [pain](#) with the [cold weather](#)," says Lesley Arnold, MD, a UC Health doctor who specializes in fibromyalgia and is director of the Women's Health Research Program at the University of Cincinnati (UC), where she is a professor of psychiatry and behavioral neuroscience.

"One possible explanation is that cold weather keeps many people less active, leading to physical de-conditioning that can contribute to more pain. In addition, in individuals with fibromyalgia who also have arthritis, cold weather can contribute to stiffness around the joints which can increase the overall pain experience.

"A drop in barometric pressure may also increase joint swelling, which can exacerbate pain," Arnold adds, referring to the atmospheric pressure drop that typically precedes rain or storms.

In addition to chronic, widespread pain, fibromyalgia is characterized by other symptoms including fatigue, sleep disturbance and cognitive symptoms such as forgetfulness or decreased concentration. It has a prevalence of about 2 percent of the of the U.S. population, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and is about seven times more common in women than in men.

Scientific evidence for a strong weather-pain association in fibromyalgia is very limited, notes Arnold, who conducts fibromyalgia-related research at UC, and the available evidence does not support a uniform influence of specific weather conditions on daily symptoms of pain in patients

with fibromyalgia. But from patients' accounts, she says, some individuals seem to be more sensitive to weather conditions or weather changes than others.

To help manage during cold weather, Arnold says, it is important for individuals to stay as active as possible and to dress warmly in layers. Keeping the body moving with a physical activity plan developed under the supervision of health care providers may prevent pain from getting worse.

"Cold weather can also disrupt social activities, so it is important to reach out to others during these cold days," says Arnold. "Our mood can affect the pain experience, with depression making it more difficult to cope with a chronic pain disorder like fibromyalgia."

Arnold says the UC Health fibromyalgia treatment program is dedicated to using the latest scientifically proven treatments to alleviate the often debilitating symptoms of fibromyalgia and to help those with chronic pain disorders live more functional lives.

"We work with patients to develop an appropriate, individualized treatment plan that may include medications, therapy and/or recommended lifestyle changes," she says. "These options have been well studied and scientifically proven to help with [fibromyalgia symptoms](#) and related disorders."

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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