

Fibromyalgia: The Benefits of Exercise and Water Aerobics

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Fibromyalgia (FM) is a syndrome that can occur at any age and in any ethnic or cultural group (Russell, 2001). However, it is most frequently seen in older women. Approximately 90% of diagnosed patients are women, most in mid to later life (Yunus & Inanici, 2002). Typically, a patient will report to her physician that she has pain everywhere and that her symptoms are getting in the way of daily activities (Russell, 2001).

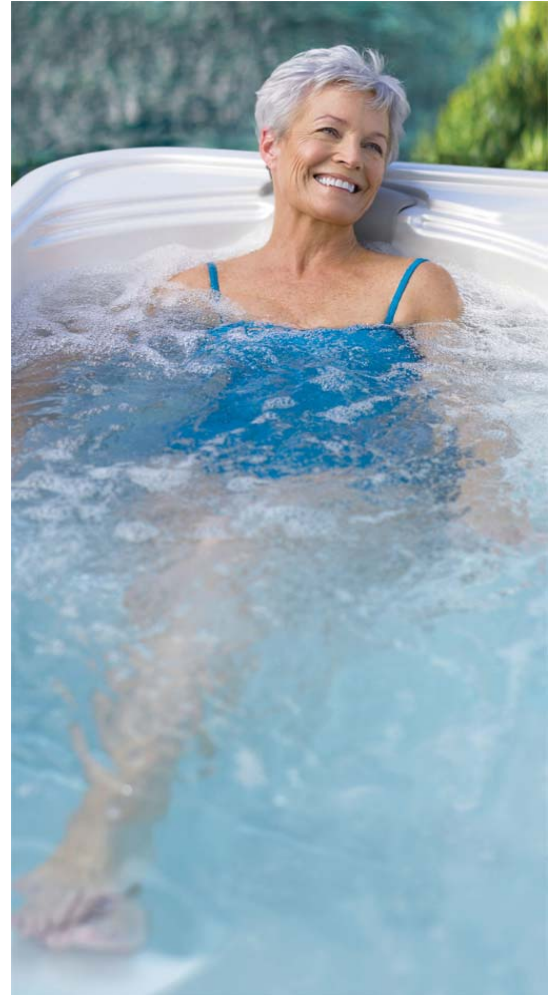
FM symptoms can be experienced throughout the body (Hulme, 1995). Widespread pain and tenderness at specific locations on the body are characteristic symptoms of the disorder (Russell, 2001). In addition to pain and tenderness, many people with FM experience symptoms such as fatigue and poor sleep, stiffness (Yunus&Inanici, 2002). This is a chronic disorder and symptoms are recurrent (McCain, 1993). Though the progression of the syndrome may wax and wane, pain is generally widespread and persistent (Bennett, 1993).

FM is experienced in very different ways by different people. It can therefore be difficult to diagnose and treat (Williamson, 1996). People with similar levels of disease severity may experience very different levels of distress and impaired function (Keefe, 1998). Often, patients are reluctant to tell their physicians all of their symptoms because they fear that they won't be believed (Starlanyl & Copeland, 1996). Because FM can be difficult to diagnose, many people may face symptoms for years before receiving a diagnosis (Williamson, 1996).

Treatment of FM is difficult because the syndrome is characterized by long-term pain (McCain, 1993). The treatment that is available focuses on reducing symptoms (Patarca-Montero, 2002) because there is no known cure. Treatment can lead to remission of the syndrome and a lessening of symptoms (Chaitow, 2001), but there are no treatments that can completely relieve all pain in every person. However, there are some treatments that have found success in people with FM, including exercise (Inanici & Yunus, 2002).

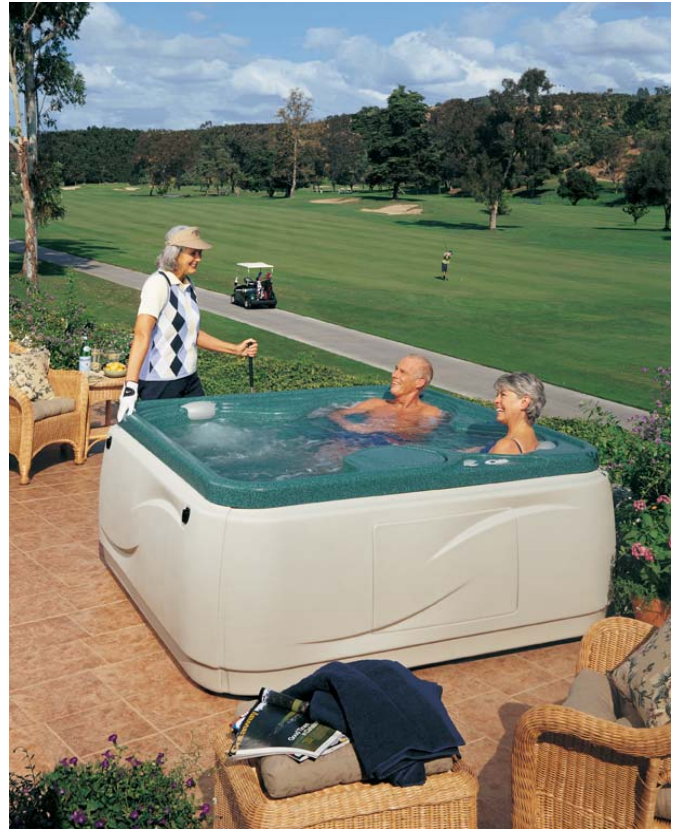
Benefits of Exercise

Exercise allows for greater physical ability to work longer at difficult tasks, and it also produces changes in the body. Exercise has been shown to release endorphins in the body, which may help to improve mood in people suffering from low self-esteem and depression (Rosenstein, 2002). It may activate opioid peptides to act as analgesics (McCain, 1990), which could lead to a decrease in perceived pain. Exercise may also lead to an increased level of serotonin in the brain (Williamson, 1996), and can be beneficial in encouraging sleep and increased energy in an individual (Salt II & Season, 2000).



Benefits of Exercising in Water

Exercising in water can be a very safe way for a person with FM to gain strength and flexibility and eventually become comfortable with the idea of other forms of exercise (Chaitow, 2001). Water can help to reduce pain, reduce possibility of microtrauma (i.e., tiny, normal tears that are not repaired easily in individuals with FM) to muscles, and increase ability to move easily (Bates & Hanson, 1996). This ease of use allows individuals to feel encouraged and successful, which increases the chances that they will continue to exercise (Kourgy, 1996). Individuals may find that more frequent exercising reduces daily feelings of pain and stiffness (Hulme, 1995). A final, and important, benefit of exercise in the water is a “positive experience of the body,” which allows participants to feel good about themselves and their performance during exercise sessions (Mannerkorpi & Gard, 2003).



Biographical Information:

Jamie E. Brass is a doctoral candidate in clinical psychology at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP). Her primary interests are in college counseling and bilingual therapy. She became involved in working with individuals with chronic pain through the Behavioral Medicine Clinic at IUP and decided to combine an interest in water aerobics with that work. Ms. Brass is currently completing her dissertation research, entitled Examination of the Psychological Benefits of Water Aerobics for Individuals with Fibromyalgia. Ms. Brass hopes to use information from this study in future work and research. Ms. Brass would like to thank the National Swimming Pool Foundation for providing a grant to fund portions of her dissertation research.

National Swimming Pool Foundation (www.nspf.org)

TESTIMONIAL

“I purchased my hot tub nearly five years ago, after being diagnosed with fibromyalgia. At that point, I was experiencing so much pain that there were days when I had difficulty walking across the street. Ibuprofen was my ultimate source of relief. Now I am pain, and drug, free! Hot tubs have the advantage of having numerous adjustable jets, which can target specific pressure points on the body. It is well known that people with fibromyalgia have pain in specific areas, and this can often be relieved by hydrotherapy massage, whereas a body massage may be too stressful, and simply cause more pain. People with arthritis can also adjust their hydrotherapy massage to their best advantage.”

Linda Aksomitis