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Regular, moderate exercise does not worsen pain in people with fibromyalgia

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For many people who have fibromyalgia, even the thought of exercising is painful. Yet a new study from Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center shows that exercise does not worsen the pain associated with the disorder and may even lessen it over time. The findings are published in the current online issue of the journal *Arthritis Care & Research*.

According to Dennis Ang, M.D., associate professor of internal medicine at Wake Forest Baptist and senior author of the study, doing light to moderate exercise over a prolonged period of time improves overall symptoms, such as fatigue and trouble sleeping, while not increasing pain.

"For many people with fibromyalgia, they will exercise for a week or two and then start hurting and think that exercise is aggravating their pain, so they stop exercising," Ang said. "We hope that our findings will help reduce patients' fear and reassure them that sustained exercise will improve their overall health and reduce their symptoms without worsening their pain."

To evaluate the relationship between long-term maintenance of moderate intensity exercise, defined as light jogging or brisk walking for 20 minutes a day, the research team enrolled 170 volunteers to participate in a 36-week study. Participants received individualized exercise prescriptions and completed baseline and follow-up physical activity assessments using the Community Health Activities Model Program for Seniors (CHAMPS) questionnaire at weeks 12, 24 and 36.

The study found that participants who engaged in moderate intensity exercise for at least 12 weeks showed greater improvements in clinical symptoms as compared to participants who were unable to achieve higher levels of physical activity.

More importantly, Ang said, the findings showed that long-term physical activity at levels consistent with current medical recommendations is not associated with worsening pain symptoms in fibromyalgia.

Approximately 10 percent of the adult population in the United States has fibromyalgia or fibromyalgia-like conditions. The disorder is characterized by widespread musculoskeletal pain accompanied by sleep disturbance, fatigue and memory issues. Experts believe that fibromyalgia is a disorder of pain processing due to abnormalities in how pain signals are processed in the central nervous system.

Provided by Wake Forest University Baptist Medical Center

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