

The Connection Between Fibromyalgia and ADHD

Why pain, fatigue, brain fog, and attention difficulties sometimes overlap

Two different conditions. Some overlapping experiences.

Fibromyalgia and ADHD may occur together more often than previously recognized. Understanding the overlap may help people receive more appropriate assessment, treatment, and everyday support.

01 Understanding fibromyalgia

Fibromyalgia is a chronic condition involving changes in how the nervous system processes pain. Symptoms can include:

PAIN AND PHYSICAL SENSITIVITY

- Widespread pain and tenderness
- Headaches, including migraines
- Sensitivity to touch, sound, light, or temperature
- Digestive difficulties

FATIGUE AND THINKING

- Severe fatigue, even after rest
- Unrefreshing sleep
- Problems with memory and concentration
- Difficulty finding words or following conversations

Fibro fog is the name many people use for difficulties with concentration, memory, and clear thinking. These symptoms are real; fibromyalgia pain does not have to correspond to visible tissue damage to be genuine.

02 What researchers have found

Studies suggest ADHD symptoms are relatively common in some samples of adults with fibromyalgia. The estimates below describe specific study groups, not everyone with fibromyalgia.

2018 STUDY

123 adults with fibromyalgia
About 45% screened positive for ADHD. Those who screened positive reported more cognitive difficulty and more severe symptoms.

Important: Screening positive does not confirm an ADHD diagnosis.

2026 STUDY

60 adults with fibromyalgia compared with 71 controls
61.7% versus 23.9% met the study criteria for adult ADHD.

43.3% versus 16.9% had measurable cognitive impairment.

ADHD was not linked with greater fibromyalgia-related disability in that study.

Bottom line: The association deserves attention, but the studies are small and do not establish cause and effect.

When symptoms overlap

Similar difficulties can have different contributing factors. Both conditions can be present at once.

Everyday difficulty	Possible ADHD contribution	Possible fibromyalgia contribution
Concentration	Attention regulation and executive functioning	Pain, fatigue, or fibro fog
Forgetfulness	Longstanding working-memory difficulties	More pronounced during pain or exhaustion
Finishing tasks	Task initiation, organization, attention	Physical symptoms limit ability to continue
Sleep	Difficulty settling or managing routines	Unrefreshing sleep and sleep disturbance
Overwhelm	Competing demands and sensory input	Pain, fatigue, sensitivity, limited energy

03 What might explain the connection?

Researchers are studying several possibilities, but there is no proven single explanation.

PAIN PROCESSING

Fibromyalgia involves changes in nervous-system pain processing. Scientists are investigating whether some related nervous-system differences contribute to overlap with ADHD.

SLEEP

Poor sleep can intensify fatigue, pain sensitivity, forgetfulness, and concentration difficulties.

NEUROTRANSMITTERS

Dopamine and other chemical signaling systems are involved in attention and aspects of pain processing. The overlap has not been shown to be caused by a simple dopamine deficiency.

STRESS

Long-term stress can worsen sleep, concentration, and pain symptoms. That does not mean stress causes fibromyalgia.

Why brain fog needs attention

Difficulties with remembering appointments, following instructions, processing information, or finding words may reflect a combination of ADHD, pain, poor sleep, medication effects, or another medical condition. A full medical history is more useful than assuming every attention problem is ADHD.

What can help?

Support should address pain, cognition, energy, sleep, and daily demands—not just individual effort.

Can treating ADHD help fibromyalgia?

ADHD treatment may improve attention, organization, and day-to-day functioning for someone who has both conditions. However, high-quality evidence is insufficient to say stimulant medication directly treats fibromyalgia pain; stimulants are not standard fibromyalgia treatment. Treatment decisions should consider both conditions and possible medication interactions.

01 Reduce memory demands

Use reminders, visual schedules, written instructions, and external systems instead of relying on memory.

02 Respect capacity

Notice how fatigue, pain, sleep, and cognitive demands affect energy. Simplify, postpone, or request help where possible.

03 Make tasks physically easier

Sit while preparing meals, use delivery options when accessible, divide tasks, and arrange commonly used items within reach.

04 Investigate sleep

Discuss unrefreshing sleep, medication effects, and possible sleep disorders with a healthcare provider.

05 Adapt physical activity

Some people benefit from appropriate movement, but the plan should fit their limitations. Report severe pain or post-exertional symptom worsening.

06 Consider psychological support

Therapy can support coping with chronic illness, changes in ability, frustration, and shame. It does not imply symptoms are imagined.

Questions worth asking

Recognizing both conditions can help clarify what is contributing and what support is needed.

04 When might an ADHD assessment help?

Consider an ADHD assessment when attention and executive-function difficulties have been present for years, especially since childhood. Fibro fog alone does not mean someone has ADHD.

Questions to explore

- ☐ Did attention, organization, or memory difficulties exist before chronic pain began?
- ☐ Were similar difficulties present during childhood or adolescence?
- ☐ Do attention problems continue when pain and fatigue are less severe?
- ☐ Have difficulties affected school, work, relationships, or daily life?
- ☐ Could poor sleep, medication, stress, or another medical condition be contributing?

05 For your healthcare appointment

1. Could ADHD, fibromyalgia, or something else contribute to my concentration problems?
2. Have we assessed the causes of my fatigue and sleep difficulties?
3. Could medications be affecting my memory, concentration, or sleep?
4. What treatments are appropriate for my pain and fatigue?
5. Would ADHD evaluation or other specialist support be helpful?
6. What accommodations could make daily life more manageable?

Remember: Difficulty functioning can reflect real pain, cognitive demands, fatigue, or several overlapping factors. A useful care plan considers the whole person.

Research and references

APA 7th edition | Fibromyalgia and ADHD

Peer-reviewed publications

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Additional clinical information

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<https://www.cdc.gov/arthritis/fibromyalgia/index.html>

National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases. (n.d.). Fibromyalgia: Diagnosis, treatment, and steps to take.
<https://www.niams.nih.gov/health-topics/fibromyalgia/diagnosis-treatment-and-steps-to-take>

How to interpret the findings

These studies indicate an association in the groups studied; they do not show that ADHD causes fibromyalgia. A positive ADHD screening result is not a confirmed diagnosis.