

Fibromyalgia (FM) and Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (ME) can overlap, which is why many people get confused or are diagnosed with both. They are not identical illnesses, although some symptoms can look similar.

Fibromyalgia core features

Fibromyalgia is primarily characterized by:

- *Widespread musculoskeletal pain
- *Tenderness/pain sensitivity
- *Stiffness
- *Sleep disturbance
- *Fatigue
- *Headaches
- *Irritable bowel symptoms
- *Sensory sensitivity (light, noise, touch)
- *"Fibro fog" (mild cognitive difficulties)

The fatigue in Fibromyalgia is usually present all the time but is not typically defined by a delayed worsening after exertion.

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Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (ME) — core features

ME is a multisystem neuroimmune disease characterized by:

- *Post-Exertional Neuroimmune Exhaustion (PENE), worsening after physical, cognitive, sensory, emotional, or orthostatic exertion)
- *Neurological dysfunction
- *Cognitive impairment ("brain fog")
- *Orthostatic intolerance (difficulty standing upright)
- *Sleep dysfunction
- *Immune symptoms
- *Muscle fatigability
- *Autonomic dysfunction
- *Sensory hypersensitivity

ME patients often describe:

*"Crashes"

*Delayed symptom worsening

*Reduced stamina and recovery capacity

*Flu-like illness feeling

*Profound exhaustion not relieved by rest

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The biggest difference: PENE

The most important distinguishing feature is Post-Exertional Neuroimmune Exhaustion.

In ME:

Even small amounts of activity can trigger:

*worsening symptoms

*delayed crashes (often 12–72 hours later)

*prolonged recovery lasting days, weeks, or longer

Exertion can worsen:

*cognition

*pain

*weakness

*orthostatic symptoms

*sleep

*sensory intolerance

In Fibromyalgia:

Activity may increase pain or tiredness, but it does not usually produce the characteristic delayed systemic crash seen in ME.

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Pain differences

Fibromyalgia pain:

*Usually the dominant symptom

*Widespread aching/burning/tenderness

*Pressure-point sensitivity common

ME pain:

*May be absent, mild, or severe

*Often linked to exertion

*Can include headaches, muscle pain, nerve pain, joint pain

A person can meet ME criteria without significant pain.

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Cognitive differences

Fibromyalgia:

*Mild to moderate concentration/memory issues

ME:

*Often more pronounced neurological dysfunction:

*slowed information processing

*word-finding problems

*difficulty multitasking

*sensory overload

*cognitive crashes after mental effort

Orthostatic intolerance

Much more characteristic of ME:

*dizziness

*rapid heart rate standing

*feeling faint

*weakness upright

*blood pressure regulation problems

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Can someone have both?

Yes. Some people meet diagnostic criteria for both ME and Fibromyalgia. They overlap frequently, but they are still considered distinct conditions.

A simplified way many clinicians explain it:

*Fibromyalgia is a pain-centered syndrome

*ME is an exertion intolerance/neuroimmune disease

Patients can experience both pain and PENE together.

References

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