

Pain Tolerance In Fibromyalgia

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Patients with fibromyalgia generally do not appear to be experiencing as much pain as they describe. Clinicians may feel that fibromyalgia patients are overly sensitive to a variety of symptoms, especially pain. This study utilized both an online survey and an identical questionnaire administered in a rheumatology office practice to assess whether fibromyalgia syndrome patients reported high or low pain thresholds and to investigate relationships between the reported threshold and reported levels of pain. To avoid confounding by gender, only female respondents were included in the analyses.

METHODS: 606 self-described female fibromyalgia patients responded to a survey through the community volunteer fibromyalgia organization, AFFTER (Advocates for Fibromyalgia Funding, Treatment, Education and Research). Patients were asked about their pain threshold, (rated from 1 = extremely sensitive to 10 = very high, using an integer scale), the amount of pain experienced during an average week, the amount of pain in various anatomical locations, and the number of areas with pain or tenderness. The Mann-Whitney test was done to compare high-threshold and low-threshold patients with the amount of reported pain.

RESULTS: Patients were predominately middle-aged (58% aged 36-55) and Caucasian (91%). About half of the patients (52%) reported a high pain threshold (7-10). No statistically significant differences were found between high-threshold and low-threshold patients with respect to the amount of pain experienced during an average week, the number of areas with pain or tenderness, or the amount of pain in most anatomical locations. However, high-threshold patients were significantly more likely than low-threshold patients to report moderate or severe pain in the upper left leg (55% vs. 44%, $p = 0.005$), lower left leg (56% vs. 42%, $p = 0.001$), and lower right leg (56% vs. 43%, $p = 0.002$).

CONCLUSIONS: There appears to be no relationship between a fibromyalgia patient's perception of having a high threshold for pain and reporting lower pain levels. On the contrary, high-threshold patients reported more leg pain than low-threshold patients. Either this is a misperception by patients, similar to what patients with anorexia feel about their weight, or patients with fibromyalgia may have a pain threshold for painful events (such as childbirth) or painful procedures (such as surgery) that differs from their threshold for fibromyalgia pain. Further investigation into this issue is warranted.

INTRODUCTION

Patients with fibromyalgia generally do not appear to be experiencing as much pain as they describe.

This study utilized both an online survey and an identical questionnaire administered in a rheumatology office practice to assess whether fibromyalgia syndrome patients reported high or low pain thresholds (whether they were able to experience painful procedures without complaining) and to investigate relationships between the reported pain threshold and levels of pain. To avoid confounding by gender, only female respondents were included in the analyses.

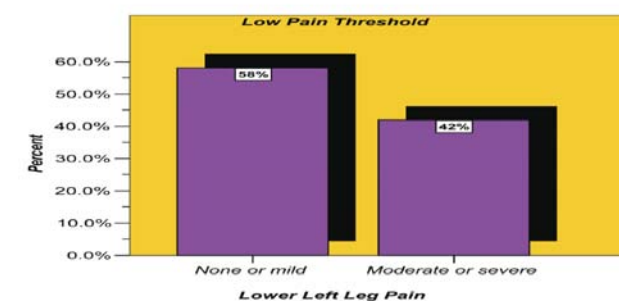
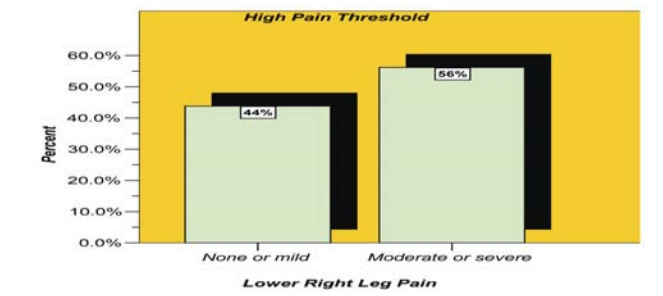
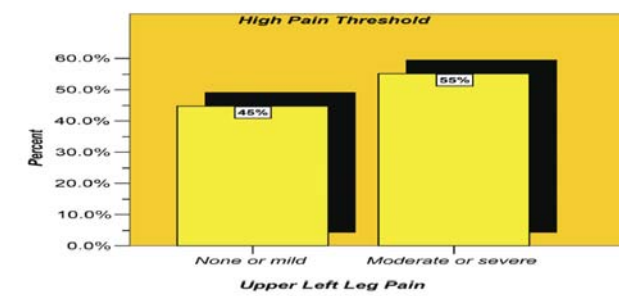
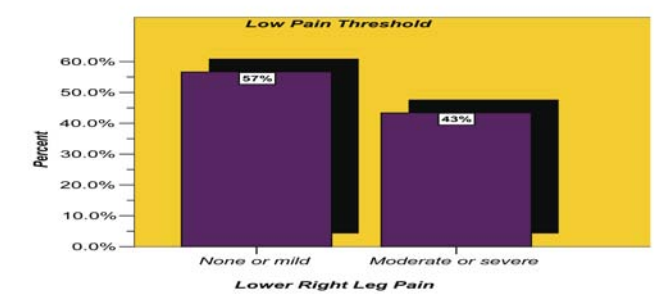
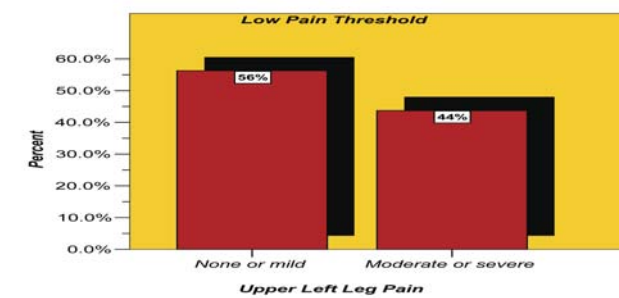
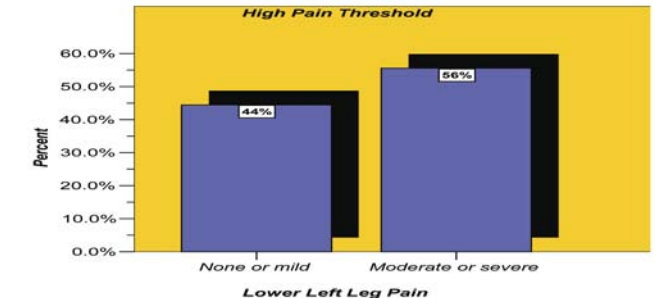
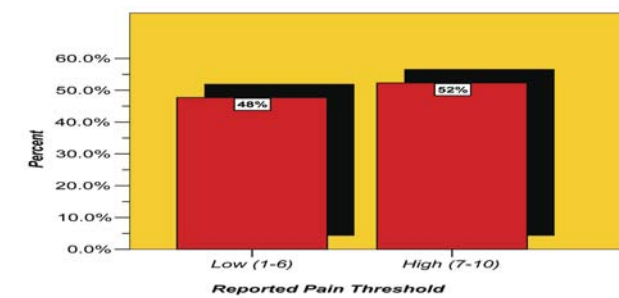
METHODS

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RESULTS

Patients were predominately middle-aged (58% aged 36-55) and Caucasian (91%). About half of the patients (52%) reported a high pain threshold (7-10). No statistically significant differences were found between self reported high-threshold and low-threshold patients with respect to the amount of pain experienced during an average week, the number of areas with pain or tenderness, or the amount of pain in most anatomical locations.

However, high-threshold patients were significantly more likely than low-threshold patients to report moderate or severe pain in the upper left leg (55% vs. 44%, $p = 0.005$), lower left leg (56% vs. 42%, $p = 0.001$), and lower right leg (56% vs. 43%, $p = 0.002$).



CONCLUSIONS

There appears to be no relationship between a fibromyalgia patient's perception of having a high threshold for pain and reporting lower pain levels. On the contrary, high-threshold patients reported more leg pain than low-threshold patients.

Either this is a misperception by patients or patients with fibromyalgia may have a pain threshold for certain types of painful events (such as childbirth) or painful procedures (such as surgery) that differs from their threshold for fibromyalgia pain. Further investigation into this issue is warranted.