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Why do women with fibromyalgia suffer so much? A review of the factors associated with late diagnosis.

Fibromyalgia in women: Factors associated with prolonged suffering and delayed diagnosis in a review

Why do women with fibromyalgia suffer so much? Review of factors associated with late diagnosis

Barbara Aline Ferreira Assunção

Summary

Fibromyalgia is a chronic syndrome characterized by diffuse musculoskeletal pain, fatigue, sleep disturbances, cognitive changes, and significant impairment of quality of life, affecting women. Despite scientific advances in the pathophysiology of the disease, diagnosis remains a challenge due to the absence of specific biomarkers and the variability of clinical manifestations, which contributes to delays in identifying the syndrome and intensifies the suffering of patients. This study aimed to understand why women with fibromyalgia experience prolonged suffering and why their symptoms are neglected, resulting in late diagnosis. This is a literature review, with a qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory approach, carried out through the analysis of studies published between 2022 and 2025. Articles addressing aspects related to the pathophysiology, diagnosis, epidemiology, and treatment of fibromyalgia in women were included. The results showed that the delay in diagnosis stems from the interaction between biological, clinical, social, and care-related factors, highlighting the absence of specific diagnostic tests, the subjectivity of pain, the heterogeneity of symptoms, and the need to rule out other diseases. The studies also demonstrated consensus regarding the multifactorial nature of the syndrome and the importance of early diagnosis for the implementation of multidisciplinary interventions capable of reducing pain, improving functionality, and promoting quality of life. It is concluded that the suffering of women with fibromyalgia is related to the limitations of the diagnostic process, which reinforces the need for strategies that favor the early recognition of the syndrome and improve the quality of care provided.

Keywords: Fibromyalgia; Women; Late diagnosis; Chronic pain; Quality of life.

Abstract

Fibromyalgia is a chronic syndrome characterized by widespread musculoskeletal pain, fatigue, sleep disturbances, cognitive impairment, and a significant reduction in quality of life, predominantly affecting women. Despite advances in understanding its pathophysiology, diagnosis remains challenging due to the absence of specific biomarkers and the heterogeneity of clinical manifestations, contributing to delayed diagnosis and prolonged patient suffering.

This study aimed to understand why women with fibromyalgia experience prolonged suffering and why their symptoms are frequently overlooked, resulting in delayed diagnosis. This qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory literature review analyzed studies published between 2022 and 2025 addressing the pathophysiology, diagnosis, epidemiology, and treatment of fibromyalgia in women. The findings indicate that delayed diagnosis results from the interaction of biological, clinical, social, and healthcare-related factors, particularly the lack of specific diagnostic tests, the subjective nature of pain, symptom heterogeneity, and the need to exclude other diseases. The reviewed studies also demonstrated consensus regarding the multifactorial nature of fibromyalgia. They highlighted the importance of early diagnosis to enable multidisciplinary interventions capable of reducing pain, improving functional capacity, and enhancing quality of life. It is concluded that the prolonged suffering experienced by

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women with fibromyalgia is associated not only with the complexity of the syndrome itself but also with limitations in the current diagnostic process, highlighting the need for strategies that promote earlier recognition of the disease and improve healthcare delivery.
Keywords: Fibromyalgia; Women; Delayed diagnosis; chronic pain; Quality of life.

1 INTRODUCTION

Chronic pain represents one of the greatest challenges in healthcare due to its impact.
It has an impact on the functionality, mental health, and quality of life of individuals. Among the
Of the various conditions associated with persistent pain, fibromyalgia stands out for its complexity.
clinical challenges and difficulties in recognizing its signs and symptoms make it a
This is a significant problem for patients and healthcare professionals.
Although scientific production on fibromyalgia has increased in recent decades,
It is observed that many women still have a long way to go before obtaining a diagnosis.
definitive. During this period, it is common for their complaints to be attributed to stress, to
anxiety, depression, or even those considered exaggerated or without apparent organic cause.
This process encourages successive medical consultations, delays in starting treatment, and
worsening of physical, emotional and social suffering.
The prevalence of fibromyalgia in women raises important questions about the
factors involved in this reality. In addition to the biological mechanisms related to the syndrome,
It becomes necessary to understand how clinical, care, and social aspects can...
to contribute to women continuing to live with pain, fatigue, and limitations for years.
without receiving an accurate diagnosis. In this context, the delay in diagnosis goes beyond the sphere
biomedical, also becoming a problem related to health care and to
Recognition of the experiences reported by the patients.
Despite advances in understanding the pathophysiological mechanisms of fibromyalgia, it is still...
Gaps remain regarding the reasons that explain the persistence of late diagnosis and the
Understanding the prolonged suffering experienced by women affected by the syndrome.
These factors can contribute to strengthening strategies aimed at recognition.
early detection of the disease, the qualification of multidisciplinary care, and the development of
more humanized care practices.
Given this context, this study aimed to understand why women with
Fibromyalgia causes prolonged suffering, and because its symptoms are often neglected,
which results in a delay in diagnosing the syndrome.

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2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Fibromyalgia (FM) is a chronic syndrome characterized by widespread musculoskeletal pain.
and persistent, accompanied by symptoms such as fatigue, sleep disturbances, cognitive changes,
anxiety and depression, compromising the quality of life of affected individuals (García-
Domínguez, 2025; Jurado-Priego et al., 2024). Although recognized in clinical practice, its
The etiology remains complex and multifactorial, involving neurobiological factors.
immunological, genetic, endocrine, and psychosocial factors interact with each other and hinder the
complete understanding of the disease.

The term *fibromyalgia* was introduced by Hench in 1976 and has become established as a clinical syndrome.
following the studies by Yunus et al., published in 1981. However, its diagnostic standardization
This only happened in 1990, when the American College of Rheumatology (American College of
Rheumatology (ACR) established classification criteria accepted by the scientific community.
which spurred the development of research and fostered greater uniformity in
diagnosis of the syndrome (De Souza Garcia et al., 2023).

From a clinical point of view, fibromyalgia is characterized by hyperalgesia and allodynia, manifested
characterized by intense and widespread pain, triggered or exacerbated by physical or emotional stress.
In addition to pain, patients may experience persistent fatigue and non-restorative sleep.
Cognitive impairment, mood changes, and reduced functional capacity, which
This presents a heterogeneous clinical picture that impacts daily activities and physical well-being.
and psychological (De Souza Garcia et al., 2023; García-Domínguez, 2025).

The pathophysiology of fibromyalgia is not yet fully understood, however, evidence
Recent studies point to the simultaneous involvement of different biological mechanisms. Among
They highlight central sensitization, characterized by changes in pain processing.
resulting from increased neuronal excitability; peripheral sensitization, related to
modifications in nociceptor signaling; and inflammatory and immunological processes that
Studies appear to contribute to the maintenance of chronic pain (Jurado-Priego et al., 2024).
They also suggest that alterations in the endogenous modulation of pain, associated with dysfunction of the
serotonergic and noradrenergic systems, as well as abnormal responses of the nervous system.
The autonomic nervous system and the neuroendocrine axis play a significant role in the manifestation of
symptoms (Gyorfi, Rupp & Abd-Elsayed, 2022).

In recent years, the inflammatory hypothesis has gained prominence in research on
Fibromyalgia. Although considered a non-inflammatory condition, recent research...

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They demonstrate an increase in pro-inflammatory cytokines, immune dysregulation, and evidence of neuroinflammation in individuals affected by the syndrome. These findings suggest that a A chronic, low-grade inflammatory state can promote sensitization of the pathways. nociceptives, contributing to the persistence and intensification of pain (García-Domínguez, 2025). Despite these advances, there are still no specific biomarkers capable of confirming the diagnosis, which makes it necessary to combine clinical assessment, validated scales and established diagnostic criteria (Jurado-Priego et al., 2024).

From an epidemiological standpoint, fibromyalgia has a high prevalence worldwide, being Considered one of the most frequent musculoskeletal diseases, second only to lower back pain. and osteoarthritis (Jurado-Priego et al., 2024). The syndrome affects women in the fourth and third trimesters. fifth decades of life, with an estimated prevalence of between 1% and 4% in the general population in several countries. In Brazil, studies indicate a prevalence close to 5%, highlighting a significant impact on public health and quality of life of this population (Santos & Lima, 2025; Souza, 2025).

Diagnosing fibromyalgia remains challenging due to the absence of abnormalities. Laboratory or imaging tests that explain the patients' symptoms. In this way, The diagnosis of the syndrome is based on the clinical history, the evaluation of symptoms and in the application of standardized instruments for measuring pain and disease severity. (De Souza Garcia et al., 2023; Jurado-Priego et al., 2024).

Given its multifactorial nature, the treatment of fibromyalgia requires a holistic approach. Multidisciplinary and individualized. Therapeutic strategies combine interventions. pharmacological and non-pharmacological, including health education, physical exercise, Physical therapy, cognitive therapies, and psychological management, aimed at reducing pain intensity. to improve functional capacity and promote a higher quality of life for patients (Jurado-Priego et al., 2024). In this context, physiotherapy has demonstrated relevant results in pain reduction and functional rehabilitation in women affected by the syndrome, through different therapeutic resources, such as therapeutic exercises, manual therapy, electrotherapy and Low-intensity laser (Santos & Lima, 2025; Souza, 2025).

Given this scenario, further investigations into the mechanisms are necessary. pathophysiological factors of fibromyalgia, related to inflammatory processes and sensitization centrally, it represents an important perspective for the development of new strategies. diagnostic and therapeutic approaches, enabling increasingly targeted and effective approaches in management of this complex and disabling clinical condition (García-Domínguez, 2025).

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3 METHOD

This study is characterized as a literature review of a qualitative nature.
descriptive and exploratory, carried out with the aim of understanding the factors associated with
The suffering of women with fibromyalgia and the causes of late diagnosis of the syndrome.
The search for studies was conducted in national and international scientific databases, with
focusing on articles published between 2022 and 2025, selecting works that addressed
aspects related to pathophysiology, clinical manifestations, diagnosis, epidemiology and
treatment of fibromyalgia. Keywords related to the topic were used, including
fibromyalgia, women, diagnosis, chronic pain, inflammation and their respective equivalents
In Portuguese.
As inclusion criteria, scientific articles available in full were considered.
published in Portuguese or English that presented evidence related to
Fibromyalgia in women, the pathophysiological mechanisms of the disease, and the difficulties
diagnostic or therapeutic strategies were excluded. Duplicate studies and works were also excluded.
incomplete, abstracts of scientific events, letters to the editor, and unrelated publications
with the objective of this research.
After selection, the studies underwent exploratory reading, followed by analytical reading.
which allowed us to extract key information about objectives, methods, results and
The scientific contributions of each publication were organized into a table.
synthesis, enabling comparison between studies regarding factors related to
suffering of women affected by fibromyalgia and the elements associated with the delay in
diagnosis.
The analysis of the findings was carried out using a qualitative approach, based on...
critical comparison of the available evidence, with the aim of identifying convergences and
There were discrepancies among the authors, as well as gaps in the literature. The synthesis of the results allowed
to understand that the suffering associated with fibromyalgia in women stems from the interaction between
biological, clinical, and psychosocial factors, exacerbated by the absence of biomarkers.
specificities and limitations of the diagnostic process adopted.

4 RESULTS

The analysis of the selected studies showed that the suffering of women with fibromyalgia

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and the delay in diagnosis stems from the interaction between biological, clinical, social and other factors healthcare. Although scientific advances have broadened knowledge about the Regarding the pathophysiology of the syndrome, difficulties related to the absence of... still persist. specific biomarkers, the clinical heterogeneity of the disease, and the subjectivity of pain are factors. which contribute to delays in diagnostic confirmation and to the downplaying of symptoms. as reported by the patients.

The main findings from the literature are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of the main findings in the literature on fibromyalgia and late diagnosis in women.

Author (Year) Study Objective Main Findings			Contribution to the objective of this research
Gyorfi, R. and Review Abd- Elsayed pathophysiology (2022).	the fibromyalgia	Pain is related to Central sensitization, neuroendocrine changes, and dysfunction identify pain processing.	It explains why conventional tests show no abnormalities. Objectives.
De Souza, in management.	reviewing strategies associated with	The pain is diffuse, persistent and physical stress and the subjectivity of symptoms, Garcia et al., for pain emotional, which makes it difficult to favor delays in (2023) clinical recognition.	This demonstrates that the diagnosis.
Jurado-Priego et al. (2024)	mechanisms, as well as diagnostic and treatment approaches. and	They highlight the lack of evidence that reviewing specific biomarker the criteria, depends on pathophysiological factors such as the need for clinical evaluation multidisciplinary.	to occur late.
García-Domínguez (2025)	to examine the relationship inflammation and pro-	It is suggested that the participation of Indica new perspectives be investigated between neuroinflammation and diagnostic and therapeutic cytokines between inflammatory factors in the pathophysiology capable of reducing fibromyalgia. of the syndrome.	underdiagnosis.
quality of life when	evaluating physiotherapy. Physiotherapy reduces pain and improves initiated in women, according to Santos and Lima (2025). prematurely.		It reinforces the importance of best results for fibromyalgia therapeutic.
Souza (2025)	low-intensity laser therapy	has demonstrated potential for early interventions. to reduce pain and improve function.	Evidence suggests that evaluating They can minimize the impact of the disease.

Source: Prepared by the author (2026).

Analysis of the studies demonstrated a consensus regarding the multifactorial nature of fibromyalgia. All authors acknowledge that the syndrome extends beyond musculoskeletal pain, involving Neurological, immunological, psychological, and functional changes that affect quality of life. of life for patients.

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Another recurring aspect relates to the prevalence of the disease among middle-aged women. However, none of the studies attribute this predominance to hormonal factors. The evidence They point to an interaction between biological predisposition and sensitization mechanisms. Pain, psychosocial factors, and difficulties in the clinical recognition of the disease. It was also observed that the delay in diagnosis stems from the absence of laboratory tests. specific, due to the wide variability of symptoms and the need to rule out other causes. Rheumatological diseases. This scenario causes many women to remain ill for years. living with chronic pain, fatigue, and functional limitations before receiving a diagnosis definitive.

4. DISCUSSION

The results show a high degree of convergence among the studies analyzed. Regarding the difficulties faced by women with fibromyalgia. Despite the advances Scientific literature from recent decades shows that the diagnosis remains clinical. depending on the professional's experience and interpretation of the symptoms presented by the patients.

In this sense, Jurado-Priego et al. (2024) and De Souza Garcia et al. (2023) present Converging positions in stating that the absence of specific biomarkers This constitutes one of the main barriers to early diagnosis. Both emphasize that tests Laboratory and imaging tests show no abnormalities sufficient to confirm the disease, which This requires the professional to base their decision on the clinical history and on assessment scales of pain.

Corroborating these findings, Gyorfi, Rupp and Abd-Elsayed (2022) demonstrate that the Fibromyalgia is associated with alterations in the central processing of pain, involving neurochemical and neuroendocrine mechanisms that do not produce structural changes detectable by conventional diagnostic methods. This evidence helps to understand why many patients report intense pain even when their tests are considered normal.

Although there is consensus regarding the role of central sensitization in the pathophysiology of syndrome, García-Domínguez (2025) expands this understanding by arguing that processes Low-grade inflammatory and neuroinflammatory mechanisms also contribute to the disease maintenance. Unlike more traditional approaches, which focus on neural sensitization, this study proposes that inflammation may represent a component

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important aspects of pathophysiology, which opens up new possibilities for the development of biomarkers and targeted therapies. Therefore, there is no disagreement among the authors, but rather an expansion of established knowledge.

Another point of convergence observed concerns the impact of the disease on quality of life. of women. Santos and Lima (2025) and Souza (2025) demonstrate that interventions Physiotherapeutic treatments reduce pain and improve functionality when started early. These results reinforce the idea that late diagnosis reduces opportunities for Intervention in the early stages of the disease.

The studies analyzed also help to understand why female symptoms are undervalued throughout the diagnostic process. As pain is a subjective phenomenon. And fibromyalgia does not present objective signs in conventional exams, many patients They go through different medical specialties until they get a definitive diagnosis. This Reality fosters feelings of frustration, anxiety, and a lack of confidence in one's own abilities. complaints, perpetuating a cycle of physical and psychological suffering.

Overall, the results of this review indicate that women's suffering with Fibromyalgia results from a combination of a complex disease, diagnostic difficulties, limitations of available methods and late recognition of the syndrome by services health. Thus, strengthening the continuing education of professionals, coupled with advancement Research on biomarkers and pathophysiological mechanisms represents a strategy essential for reducing time to diagnosis and increasing the effectiveness of interventions. therapeutic measures and promoting a better quality of life for women affected by fibromyalgia.

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