

Good Health

# Could a £299 electric earring help control chronic pain?

**L**INDA HORNCastle was a fit, active young woman who loved cycling, skiing and Scottish dancing. At 29, she was looking forward to the birth of her first baby.

But when she woke up from the anaesthetic after her son was born by Caesarean, something felt horribly wrong. "The pain was terrible — it was terrifying," says Linda, now 52.

"The midwives were trying to talk to me, but I was in so much pain I couldn't make out what they were saying. My husband David, holding our new baby Matthew in his arms, was visibly upset.

"I ached from head to toe. I could hold and feed Matthew only if I took lots of painkillers and used pillows to prop up my arms and shoulders, which were terribly painful. It was as if I'd gone into the operating theatre as one person and woken up another."

Linda was suffering from fibromyalgia, a chronic disorder that causes severe pain in the soft fibrous tissues of the body — the muscles, ligaments and tendons.

Around 2.7 million people in Britain are thought to be affected, most of them women. It can affect any age, but usually emerges between 35 and 60.

Experts say the syndrome can be triggered by a viral infection or an emotional or physical trauma such as a car accident, surgery or childbirth. However, for some patients there is no obvious trigger.

Research suggests fibromyalgia is caused by faulty pain signals between the body and the brain. The patient can feel agonising pain all over the body, says Toby Garrod, consultant rheumatologist at Guy's and St Thomas's NHS Trust.

"The condition is characterised by chronic, widespread pain and it's usually associated with other symptoms such as headaches, irritable bowel syndrome, problems with memory and concentration."

Patients also end up deprived of deep sleep, because they are constantly woken by the pain. The condition can't be picked

up by scans, X-rays or blood tests, making diagnosis difficult. "Patients often look well and tests and investigations are "normal", so they sometimes have trouble convincing friends, family and even doctors there is something going on," says Mr Garrod. Indeed, it was ten years before Linda was diagnosed.

"Back at home after the birth, the exhaustion and pain continued," she says. "I just presumed all new mums felt like that, but when it got no better after a few months, I saw my GP."

"He suspected a trapped nerve in my neck and referred me for physiotherapy, but I couldn't even do the stretches and exercises they gave me."

**S**HE had to give up her job as an NHS occupational therapist and became a house-bound recluse. "I ached continually, with random shooting pains around my body," says Linda. "On my worst days I'd roll out of bed to ease the stiffness, but as soon as my feet touched the floor, pain would shoot from my heels up my legs. Walking felt like wading through treacle."

After the birth of her second son, Stephen, three years later, Linda deteriorated dramatically. She made countless trips to her GP, but was simply prescribed painkillers.

"No one could tell me what was wrong — the doctors concentrated on the idea I had a trapped nerve. I felt depressed and guilty that I couldn't be a good mother. I'd lie awake at

By **FIONA DUFFY**

night wondering if I had cancer or multiple sclerosis."

Finally, a breakthrough came in 2000 when the family moved to France for three years with David's managerial job and Linda asked her new doctor for help.

He referred her to a rheumatologist who did a 'tender point' test — the patient is checked for pain and tenderness in at least 11 of 18 specific sites across the body, including the elbows, chest, lower back, knees and shoulders.

"As the doctor pressed various points on my body, I felt such pain I nearly leapt off the couch," says Linda. "Then he said: 'You have fibromyalgia.'"

"I was upset there wasn't a cure, but the relief of finally knowing what was wrong was enormous."

Back in Britain, Linda's diagnosis was confirmed by two consultant rheumatologists. "But the general consensus seemed to be: 'Just live with it,'" she says. "I was offered lots of medication by the GP, but the side effects were terrible."

Frustrated at the lack of support, Linda, of Seer Green, Buckinghamshire, founded the South Bucks Fibromyalgia Support Group in 2001.

She continued to deteriorate and started to experience "fibrofog" — cognitive problems including short-term memory loss and an inability to concentrate or focus.

Linda tried everything from acupuncture to exclusion diets and TENS (transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation) machines — pain-relief devices commonly used in pregnancy — but nothing worked.

By 2004, aged 44, she began to use a wheelchair. But then one day, at a gentle swimming session organised through her support group, she started chatting to a retired doctor who had specialised in fibromy-

algia for 20 years. He told her about a new form of electrical therapy device that had been developed in the U.S., and was being launched here.

The Alpha-Stim sends tiny amounts of electricity into the body via probes, sticky pads or clips attached to the ear lobes.

It is said to work by blocking the transmission of pain signals, in the way TENS machines do — but at a different frequency which, it's claimed, is closer to the kind of electrical impulses that occur naturally between cells. The current level is low, so the user barely feels anything.

"When I read that trials had showed a 91 per cent improvement in pain relief for fibromyalgia sufferers, I thought it sounded too good to be true, but agreed to try it out," says Linda.

"Over three weeks, the pain and fatigue eased. I felt less tired and stiff in the mornings, my brain felt clearer and I could walk for longer distances. I've been using it every day since."

Dr Bob Lister, a specialist in fibromyalgia at London

Metropolitan University, says: "I've been surprised as to how effective the Alpha-Stim has proved to be in tests."

"When used properly, it has proved to be effective in reducing the severity of many of the disabling symptoms of fibromyalgia."

**H**OWEVER, others are not so convinced. The device is yet to be approved by the government health watchdog NICE. Dr Ernest Choy, consultant rheumatologist at King's College London, says Alpha-Stim results are variable.

"Some patients find it helpful while others do not," he says. "More research is needed to find out how to maximise its benefit."

Des Quinn, vice-chair of the Fibromyalgia Association UK, says: "We appreciate anything that brings relief to people who suffer the chronic pain and fatigue that fibromyalgia brings. However, it is unfortunate that people have to resort to spending money to gain relief instead of being able to access proper treatments from the NHS."

The device is far from cheap, costing from £299. Linda, at least, is happy she's returned to a much more active life. In January last year, she felt well enough to return to work as an occupational therapist (she also works as an Alpha-stim trainer). And last

September, the family had a dream holiday in San Francisco.

"I've got my life back, she says. "For 22 years I was watching the world go by, but now I've rejoined it."

■ [Fibromyalgia-associationuk.org](http://Fibromyalgia-associationuk.org), helpline 0844 887 2444.



Years of agony: But Linda — with pet dog Susie — says she now suffers less pain

Picture: JOHN LAWRENCE

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**2.3**  
The average time in years it takes to be diagnosed with fibromyalgia

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