

Patient information from BMJ

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Ankylosing spondylitis: what is it?

Ankylosing spondylitis mainly affects the spine, causing stiffness and pain. It affects how you can move, and it can cause different degrees of disability. There is no cure, but treatments can help relieve the symptoms and keep you moving as much as possible.

What is ankylosing spondylitis?

Ankylosing spondylitis is a condition that causes inflammation (swelling) in the spine. This can lead to pain, stiffness, problems with movement, fatigue (tiredness), and problems in other parts of the body.

You might also hear ankylosing spondylitis referred to as one of several conditions that affect the spine, under the term axial spondyloarthritis.

In some people with ankylosing spondylitis, some of the bones in the spine can fuse (join) together, causing even more stiffness and problems with movement. Joints in the hips and knees can sometimes also be affected.

Ankylosing spondylitis can also be linked to other problems, including:

- bowel inflammation, which can cause symptoms similar to those of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)
- tendon pain: for example, in the Achilles tendons
- scaly, rough patches on the skin, called psoriasis
- a problem with the eyes, called iritis. This can cause redness in the eyes, sensitivity to light, and blurred vision.

Ankylosing spondylitis is a genetic condition. This means that it is caused by the genes you inherit from your parents. It usually begins during the teenage years, although it can start earlier or later.

It is two to three times more common in boys and men than in girls and women. In some people the condition improves over time, while in other people it gets worse.

What are the symptoms?

Ankylosing spondylitis often takes many years to be properly diagnosed. This is partly because back pain is common, and it can be hard for doctors to tell one type of back problem from another.

The symptoms of ankylosing spondylitis can include:

- early morning back stiffness that gets better after you have been up and moving around for a while
- pain that gets better if you take ibuprofen or another NSAID (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug)
- pain that alternates from one buttock to another: so you might have pain on one side one day, and on the other side on a different day
- pain that wakes you in the second half of the night.

Other things that suggest that back pain might be caused by ankylosing spondylitis might include having:

- pain in the tendons: for example, in the Achilles tendon
- psoriasis
- a condition called iritis, that causes swelling in the eye
- inflammatory bowel disease, like IBS
- shortness of breath
- fatigue
- disturbed sleep.

There is no test that can tell for certain whether you have ankylosing spondylitis. Doctors diagnose it by asking you about your symptoms and examining you. For example, he or she might look to see if your spine is the right shape or if it doesn't bend as easily as it should.

But some tests can help with diagnosis. For example, you will have an x-ray of the pelvis and lower back, and possibly another type of scan.

If the scan and your symptoms suggest that you might have ankylosing spondylitis, your doctor should refer you to a specialist to get the best help.

What will happen?

It's impossible to say what will happen to you as an individual. In some people, ankylosing spondylitis gets worse over time, while in others it stays the same or improves.

But we know that the people who tend to do best are those who stay as active as possible and who do regular physiotherapy.

You will need regular check-ups to assess your levels of pain, stiffness, and fatigue, and whether any joints other than your spine are affected. This can help your doctor to adjust your

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medicine to what will help you most. You might have a scan every few years, to check your spine.

Ankylosing spondylitis doesn't usually affect how long people live. But people with ankylosing spondylitis have an increased chance of heart problems. So your doctor will want to check you regularly for any signs of heart trouble.

If you have any problems with your eyes, see your doctor straight away. This could be a condition called iritis, which is common in people with ankylosing spondylitis. It needs to be treated as soon as possible to make sure it doesn't affect your vision.

If you regularly take NSAIDs for your symptoms you will need regular blood tests to check that the medicines are not harming your liver or kidneys.

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