



Ankylosing spondylitis (AS)

- Ankylosing spondylitis is a type of arthritis that mainly affects the spine
- There's no cure; however it can be managed with medicines and lifestyle changes
- The most important thing you can do is regular exercise, which helps to keep your spine flexible

Ankylosing spondylitis (AS) is a type of inflammatory arthritis that mainly affects the backbone (spine). Symptoms include back pain, stiffness and reduced movement in the spine.

The joints that connect the base of the spine to your pelvis, called the sacroiliac joints, are commonly affected by AS. Other joints such as the hips and shoulders can also be affected, as can the eyes, skin, bowel and lungs.

Both men and women can get AS. Symptoms usually appear between the ages of 15 and 45 years. While there's currently no cure for AS, there are many things you can do to help control your symptoms.

AS is an autoimmune disease. That means it occurs due to a faulty immune system. Instead of identifying and killing foreign bodies, such as bacteria and viruses, your immune system mistakenly attacks healthy tissue in and around your joints. This causes inflammation and pain.

As a result of this inflammation, new bone may grow around the joints in the spine. This can lead to permanent stiffness in the back and neck of some people with AS.

In severe cases, this extra bone can fuse the bones of the spine together. This can usually be prevented by starting treatment as soon as possible.

Symptoms

The symptoms of AS vary from person to person. The most common symptoms are:

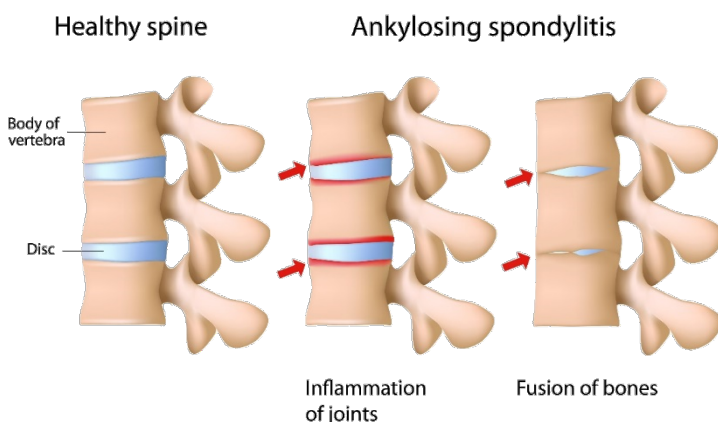
- pain and stiffness in the back, buttocks or neck. The symptoms are often worse after rest and relieved by exercise.
- pain in tendons (which connect muscles to bones) and ligaments (which connect bones to each other). This is often felt as pain at the front of the chest, back of the heel or underneath the foot.
- fatigue, or extreme physical and mental tiredness.

Symptoms may change from day to day. At times your symptoms, such as pain, fatigue and inflammation, can become more intense. This is called a flare. Flares are unpredictable and can seem to happen for no reason.

Cause

We don't know what causes AS, but your genes are thought to play a role. You're more likely to get AS if someone in your family has it.

Most people with AS have the gene called HLA-B2. However this gene can also be found in people who don't have AS.



Since the presence of this gene doesn't automatically lead to someone getting AS, other factors are thought to be involved.

Diagnosis

Getting diagnosed quickly is important so your treatment can be started as soon as possible.

After talking with your doctor about your symptoms and other relevant health information, you may undergo several tests, including:

- a physical examination
- scans such as x-ray, CT (computed tomography), MRI (magnetic resonance imaging)
- blood tests
- genetic testing.

These tests are generally organised by your doctor or rheumatologist (a doctor who specialises in conditions that affect muscles, bones and joints). They'll explain what the tests are looking for and what the results mean.

Treatment

There's no cure for AS, so treatment aims to manage your pain, reduce your risk of complications and improve your quality of life. Your rheumatologist will fit your treatment to your specific symptoms and the severity of your condition. This can involve trialling different medicines to find the ones that work best for you.

Medicine

Medicines used to treat AS include:

- pain relievers (or analgesics) - for short-term pain relief
- non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) - to control inflammation and provide short-term pain relief
- corticosteroids - to quickly manage or reduce inflammation
- disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs) – to control your overactive immune system
- biologics and biosimilars (bDMARDs) - are biological disease-modifying drugs that target specific parts of your immune system.

Exercise

Although exercise is essential for general wellbeing, it's crucial in managing AS. Exercise can relieve pain and help keep your spine moving and flexible.

Specific strengthening exercises should be done to maintain strength through your spine. Exercises performed in warm water (hydrotherapy) can also be helpful.

For overall wellbeing, you should also do general strengthening and aerobic exercises. It's helpful to see a professional who can create an exercise program to suit your specific needs. Talk with your doctor about seeing a physiotherapist or exercise physiologist.

Self-management

There are many things you can do to help yourself:

Learn more about your condition - knowing as much as possible about your AS means that you can make informed decisions about your healthcare and play an active role in managing it.

Exercise and stay active as much as possible - talk with a physiotherapist or an exercise physiologist for specific advice about a daily exercise and stretching program.

Get up and move if you've been sitting or standing in one position for a long time.

Learn ways to manage your pain - there are many things you can do to manage pain, and different strategies will work for different situations. For example, heat packs can help ease muscle pain, cold packs can help with inflammation, gentle exercise can help relieve muscle tension. Try different things until you find the ones that work best for you.

Stay involved - in your usual home activities, work, leisure and social activities. These social connections are essential for your wellbeing.

Eat a healthy, well-balanced diet for general good health.

Manage your stress - stress can aggravate your symptoms and make you feel worse.

Accept your emotions - it's natural to feel lots of different feelings when you're diagnosed with AS. You may feel scared, frustrated, sad or angry. It's important to recognise and accept these feelings and get help if they start affecting your daily life. Your doctor can provide you with information about support that's available.

Seek support from others - you might find it helpful to contact the Ankylosing Spondylitis Group of Victoria and speak to other people who have AS and know what you're going through. Contact us for information and contact details.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Rheumatologist
- Physiotherapist
- Exercise physiologist
- Musculoskeletal Australia
www.msk.org.au
MSK Help Line: 1800 263 265

How we can help

Call our MSK Help Line and speak to our nurses.
Phone 1800 263 265 or email helpline@msk.org.au.

We can help you find out more about:

- ankylosing spondylitis
- ways to live well
- managing your pain
- upcoming webinars, seminars and other events.

More to explore

- Australian Physiotherapy Association
www.physiotherapy.asn.au
- Exercise and Sports Science Australia
www.essa.org.au
- Spondylitis Association of America
www.spondylitis.org
- NASS - National Ankylosing Spondylitis Society (UK) <http://nass.co.uk>
- Versus Arthritis UK
www.versusarthritis.org
- Arthritis Foundation (USA) www.arthritis.org
- Better Health Channel
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

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