



Patient Information Sheet: Ankylosing Spondylitis

What is ankylosing spondylitis?

- Ankylosing spondylitis (pronounced ankle-low-zing spond-ill-eye-tiss) is arthritis involving the spine.
- Ongoing inflammation of the spinal joints (vertebrae) is present causing pain, stiffness and frequently bent posture. The inflammation may eventually make the vertebrae fuse together.

How common is ankylosing spondylitis?

- Men are estimated to develop ankylosing spondylitis three times more often than women.
- The first signs and symptoms appear between the ages of 15 and 40.
- One in 1,000 are affected.

What causes ankylosing spondylitis?

- The exact cause is unknown.
- An inherited gene (HLA-B27) is associated with an increased risk of developing ankylosing spondylitis. However, the specific role of this gene is not fully understood.

How do you know if you have ankylosing spondylitis?

- Increasing low back pain is the most common symptom.
- Back stiffness first thing in the morning or after a prolonged period of rest is the second most common symptom.
- Inflammation of the tendons and ligaments that connect and provide support to joints can lead to pain and tenderness in the ribs, shoulder blades, hips, thighs, shins, heels and along the bony points of the spine.

- In the early stages some people may have mild fever, loss of appetite and generally feel uncomfortable.
- The eyes can be affected and symptoms include eye pain, watery eyes, red eyes, blurred vision and sensitivity to light.
- A family history of persistent back problems may be present.
- A thorough physical examination looking for loss of spinal flexibility and function will be performed.
- X-rays and/or bone scan of the low back and pelvis are taken.

How is ankylosing spondylitis treated?

- No cure exists but there are ways of improving symptoms and function.

Exercise

- The key to a positive result is performing daily back exercises as set out by a physiotherapist.
- An upright posture is also important.

Medication

- Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) are the most commonly prescribed medication. These drugs help control the inflammation of the joints of the vertebrae and decrease pain and stiffness.
- NSAIDs may increase your risk of stomach upset and bleeding in the gut. Let your doctor know if you experience stomach pain, indigestion or black stools.
- Other prescribed medications are the recently approved cyclooxygenase-2 selective inhibitors (COXIBs) class of medications. Like other NSAIDs, COXIBs have similar effectiveness to older NSAIDs in reducing pain and swelling. COXIBs do not prevent joint damage. They may be used if you are at risk of stomach upset or other gastrointestinal (GI) risk factors.

- For those with severe disease who have inflamed joints, a drug called sulfasalazine can help manage these symptoms, and better control the disease.
- Occasionally a cortisone injection into an affected joint or ligament brings short-term relief.
- For those whose eyes are affected, seeing an ophthalmologist is recommended in addition to using cortisone eye drops.

For medications prescribed by your doctor, it is important to know:

- Name(s) (generic and brand):
- How much to take:
- When to take it:
- How quickly will it work:
- For how long should it be taken:
- Side effects to look out for:

Protect Your Joints

- Pace yourself by alternating heavy or repeated tasks with easy ones or rest.
- Position your body to avoid stress on joints.
- Use helpful devices in your daily tasks such as carts, enlarged handles, canes and grab bars.

Relaxation

- Relaxing the muscles reduces joint pain.

- Relaxation can include deep breathing exercises, listening to music, visualization, prayer, meditation or listening to relaxation tapes.

Surgery

Joint replacement surgery may be necessary in those cases where the hip joint is seriously damaged.

For More Information...

This fact sheet is just a brief look at ankylosing spondylitis. For more information or if you have any questions, ask your doctor or pharmacist, or call The Arthritis Society at 1-800-321-1433. You can also visit The Arthritis Society's Web site at www.arthritis.ca.

Questions to ask your doctor at your next visit:

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