

Ankylosing Spondylitis & You

What is it?



Ankylosing spondylitis (AS) is a chronic (long-term) disease affecting the low back. For some reason, the body's immune system becomes confused and starts to attack the back, causing inflammation. This inflammation causes the back to become stiff and painful. Unfortunately, we don't yet know why the immune system does this or what triggers it.

The body tries to repair the inflammation by growing new bone. Unfortunately, this bone can actually grow across the joint. If left untreated, a joint can end up being completely fused. This can cause more stiffness and pain.

Luckily, there are effective treatments available. Even if they don't cure AS, the right treatments can make living with it much more comfortable.



AS can make it feel like you're a "Tin Man."

The right treatment can reduce inflammation so that the joints work smoothly and don't become damaged.

In the movie *The Wizard of Oz*, one of the main characters was called the "Tin Man." He needed to have his joints oiled all the time so he could keep moving. Without that, he would stiffen up and couldn't move. People with AS are sometimes compared to the "Tin Man." Instead of oil, people with AS need regular stretching and exercise to keep their joints moving smoothly. Many people also need medications to help control the inflammation and prevent it from damaging their joints.

What is it going to do to me?



The joints in the lower back are the first to be affected. With time AS can spread upwards to involve the rest of the spine. It can also affect other areas of the body like the hips, shoulders, and the knees. Sometimes tendons at the back of the heels or under the bottom of the feet may become inflamed. People with AS can also have inflammation in one or both eyes.



One thing to remember about AS and other types of inflammatory arthritis is that chronic (long-term) inflammation is not good for the body. Chronic swelling in a joint can cause permanent damage. We also now know that having AS or other types of inflammatory arthritis is linked to heart disease. That means people with AS have a higher chance of developing heart disease than people without AS.

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RheumInfo.com is a free educational website where you can learn more about AS and treatments for the disease. The website is operated by Dr. Andy Thompson, a rheumatologist.

What can I do about it?



The first thing you should do is make sure your AS is treated. If you have AS or think you may have AS, your family doctor should refer you to a rheumatologist. A rheumatologist is a specialist doctor who is an expert in treating arthritis. This type of doctor is in the best position to help you manage your condition.

The goal of treatment is to keep the spine flexible and the joints moving before AS causes bones to fuse together. Once the damage from AS is done it cannot be reversed with any kind of treatment.

There are two important parts to treating AS:

- 1. Physical therapy and daily stretching can reduce the stiffness in your back and improve your mobility.**
- 2. Medications can reduce pain, improve function and mobility.**

In some people, it is important and necessary to treat AS with medications. The most common types of medications used include non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) and biologics.

Make sure you do everything you can to reduce your risk of heart disease. Keep your blood pressure and cholesterol at healthy levels. If you have diabetes, keep your blood sugar under control. If you are a smoker, quitting can improve your condition. It can also be one of the best things you can do for your overall health. Here are some other recommendations on what you should do:

- **Learn as much as you can about the disease**
- **See your rheumatologist regularly**
- **Get your blood tests regularly as suggested by your rheumatologist**
- **Reduce your risk of heart disease**