

AXIAL SPONDYLOARTHRITIS (axSpA)

What is Axial Spondyloarthritis?

Axial spondyloarthritis (axSpA) is a chronic autoimmune disease that primarily affects the spine, causing pain, swelling, and stiffness. It occurs when the immune system mistakenly attacks healthy joint tissue, causing inflammation and damage. axSpA can also affect other organs in the body, such as the skin, eyes, lungs, and gut.

What causes axSpA?

The exact cause of axSpA is unclear to researchers. Most patients with axSpA have a genetic predisposition to it. Environmental factors like smoking, infections, and trauma may also play a role in its development.



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What are Signs and Symptoms?

- Low back and buttock pain that improves with activity
- Prolonged morning stiffness
- Joint or tendon swelling
- Unusual fatigue
- Some patients also develop psoriasis, inflammatory eye conditions like uveitis, inflammatory bowel disease like Crohn's or ulcerative colitis

Normal posture



Advanced ankylosing spondylitis



Signs and Symptoms

Top: our goal is to prevent signs of advanced axSpA, this is not what we would expect to see at initial diagnosis (HealthWise, n.d). Bottom (left-to-right): swollen joints in toes (Balton, 2020); swollen left tendon (Cush, 2017); inflammatory eye condition (anterior uveitis, n.d.).

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How is this Diagnosed?

There is not one specific test or symptom that diagnoses axSpA. Rheumatologists use various pieces of information when diagnosing axSpA.

A rheumatologist diagnoses axSpA by evaluating your symptoms, asking your history, performing a physical exam, including a joint exam, and obtaining blood work and x-rays.

Some blood tests associated with the development of axSpA include the HLA-B27 antigen.

Erythrocyte sedimentation rate (ESR) and c-reactive protein (CRP) are additional blood tests that may help detect active inflammation in the body.

Your rheumatologist may withdraw fluid from a swollen joint to also help diagnose psoriatic arthritis



Am I Alone in This?

5% of patients who experience chronic back pain lasting more than three months will be diagnosed with axSpA

axSpA affects **0.9-1.7% of the population**

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How is Axial Spondyloarthritis Treated?

The goal of treatment is to maintain joint function, manage pain, and improve quality of life. Treatment options include a combination of interventions including:

- Medication treatment
- Occupational/Physical therapy
- Emotional support
- Nutritional guidance

Medication Treatment Options

NSAIDs are first line for pain and stiffness including

- Ibuprofen
- Naproxen
- Celecoxib
- Meloxicam

Biologic DMARDs help prevent progression of the disease by reducing inflammation in the spine and any other joints associated with axSpA. Biologics come in many forms including injections, infusions, and oral pills.

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What else can we do in addition to medications?

Along with medication therapy, patients with axSpA benefit from lifestyle interventions including:

- Maintaining a healthy weight
- Incorporating a low-impact exercise routine
- Quitting smoking
- Eating well-balanced anti-inflammatory diet
- Getting adequate sleep
- Managing stress levels
- Cultivating a support system



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Are there other Healthcare Professionals I Should See?

- Patients work closely with their **rheumatologists** to manage their axSpA and monitor treatments.
- **Physical therapists** and **occupational therapists** work with patients to improve muscle strength and range of motion of joints.
- If joint damage from uncontrolled axSpA causes limitations, patients may also consult with an **orthopedist** to evaluate whether surgical intervention should be considered.
- axSpA can affect other organs such as the eyes, cardiovascular system, or gastrointestinal system, so patients may also require close monitoring by an **ophthalmologist, cardiologist, and/or gastroenterologist**.



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References

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