

BAMBOO SPINE: QUICK FACTS



What is “bamboo spine”?

Ankylosing spondylitis (AS) is a lifelong disease which causes inflammation in the spine on an ongoing basis. It varies in severity from patient to patient. In the worst (but not all) cases, it can cause extra bone growth on the spine, leading to severe stiffness and immobility, often creating a forward-stooped posture.

Who is at risk?

Men and women of all ages can get AS, but the disease is more common in males in the age group of 17 to 45 years. AS also has a strong genetic link and may run in families.

What are typical symptoms?

- **Back pain** – usually starts in the lower back and sacrum, and can eventually spread to the rest of the spine.
- **Pain in other areas**, particularly the shoulders, hips, ribs, heels and small joints of the hands and feet.
- **Episodes of pain** – the pain will flare up for certain time periods, after which a period of relief of symptoms will follow.
- **Stiffness of the back** – immobility of spinal sections, and in severe cases, fusion of the vertebrae can take place.
- **General fatigue** is a common symptom which accompanies chronic inflammation
- **Eye infections** occur in about one third of AS patients

How is it diagnosed?

A diagnosis is made on the grounds of medical history, clinical symptoms, blood tests, X-rays and/or MRI.

Cause and cure?

The cause of AS is still unknown. Although no cure has been found, methods exist to slow the course of disease. Treatment focuses on pain management and maintenance of mobility and functionality. Regular visits to the rheumatologist and physiotherapist is important.

What is the prognosis?

AS is a slow-progressing disease. The course of disease varies greatly from person to person. Some patients only experience mild lumbar pain from time to time which is easily resolved with the use of anti-inflammatory medication. In other people, symptoms can become much worse with time, eventually leading to disability and postural deformity.

You can lead a normal life!

Although symptoms of AS can cause great discomfort at times, it is a condition that can be well managed with the correct medication and regular physiotherapy. Many patients with AS have excelled to great heights. Famous sport stars with AS include Australian cricketer Michael Slater, professional surfer Shane Wehner, US powerlifter Randy Gallan and British golfer Michael King.

Source: www.spondylitis.org