

# Axial Spondyloarthritis

## About Axial Spondyloarthritis

Axial spondyloarthritis (axSpA) is a form of arthritis in the back, although other joints can also be involved.

There are two types of axSpA: ankylosing spondylitis (AS), in which damage is visible on X-rays, and non-radiographic axSpA (nr-axSpA), where damage is not visible on X-rays.

In severe or long-standing AS cases, the joints in the spine and vertebrae may fuse together, causing the back to become stiff and hard to move. The rib cage may also fuse, restricting chest movement.

In axSpA, the immune system, which fights harmful viruses and bacteria, mistakenly attacks healthy cells and tissue, too. The causes of axSpA are unclear, but genes seem to play a role; many people with axSpA have a gene called HLA-B27. However, having the gene doesn't mean you'll get axSpA.

## Signs and Symptoms of Axial Spondyloarthritis

Symptoms usually appear between the ages of 20 and 40, but children also can develop axSpA.

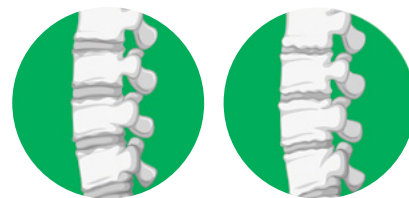
Other symptoms include:

- Pain and swelling in the toes, heels, ankles, knees, rib cage, upper spine, shoulders or neck that develops over weeks or months
- Stiffness in the morning or after periods of inactivity
- Swollen, sausage-like fingers or toes
- Pain in the buttocks that may move from side to side
- Back pain at night or early in the morning
- Fatigue
- Appetite loss

AxSpA can affect other body parts, too, including the eyes, digestive tract and internal organs. It may also be associated with psoriasis, a skin disease that's due to immune system problems. In rare cases, axSpA may affect the heart and lungs.



Healthy joint



Axial spondyloarthritis



## FAST FACTS

- In adults, axSpA usually causes pain in the lower back, buttocks and hips first. In children, pain usually starts in the hips, knees and heels before the back.
- Women are more likely than men to get nr-axSpA.

## For More Information

Axial Spondyloarthritis  
Information & Resources  
[arthritis.org/about-axspa](https://arthritis.org/about-axspa)

Arthritis Foundation Helpline:  
800-283-7800  
[arthritis.org/helpline](https://arthritis.org/helpline)

## Diagnosing Axial Spondyloarthritis

You might see your primary care doctor first for joint pain. If you have axSpA symptoms, go to a rheumatologist, who specializes in arthritis.

No single test can diagnose axSpA. To rule out other causes of hip and back pain, the rheumatologist will:

- Ask about your medical history
- Perform a physical exam
- Get laboratory tests to look for signs of inflammation in the body or the HLA-B27 gene
- Order imaging tests (like X-rays or MRIs) of the pelvis and spine

## Treating Axial Spondyloarthritis

Goals for treatment include:

- Relieving pain and stiffness
- Preventing spinal deformity
- Preventing joint and organ damage
- Preserving joint function and mobility
- Improving quality of life

Doctors recommend early treatment with powerful medications.

Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) are commonly used to treat axSpA pain and inflammation. They are available over the counter (ibuprofen, naproxen) as well as by prescription. When disease activity cannot be controlled with NSAIDs, your doctor may prescribe a biologic or other disease-modifying drug. Pain-relief drugs, called “analgesics,” like acetaminophen, can reduce pain but don’t slow the damage from inflammation. Corticosteroid pills are usually not recommended for axSpA except to control a flare. Corticosteroid shots may be used to reduce inflammation in the hips or shoulders.

Treatment plans may also include physical therapy and self-care. Surgery is sometimes needed to relieve pain and restore function.

## Self-Management

Self-care is key to managing axSpA, including:

- Getting regular exercise
- Eating a balanced, whole-food diet
- Not smoking. It can worsen disease activity and joint damage.
- Maintaining good posture
- Pacing activities
- Managing stress by deep breathing or other relaxation exercises and staying close to friends and family who support you.

## FAQs

### What is the best exercise for axSpA?

It depends on the individual. Low-impact activities like water aerobics, walking, swimming and yoga are good choices. The best exercise is one you will stick with and enjoy, but talk to your doctor first; they may refer you to a physical therapist to teach you core-strengthening exercises and stretching techniques to relieve stiffness.

### Is there a special diet to help axSpA symptoms?

There is not a special “axSpA diet.” However, a diet that emphasizes lean protein, vegetables, fruits, whole grains and healthy fats (including olive oil and fatty fish), like the Mediterranean diet, may help lower inflammation and maintain a healthy weight. Being overweight fuels inflammation and can interfere with the effectiveness of axSpA medications.

### Does axSpA go away?

No, it is a chronic disease and has no cure, but it is possible to reach little or no disease activity (remission) with the right treatment plan. However, symptoms still might return.