

# Ankylosing Spondylitis (AS)

## Employers' Guide to Ankylosing Spondylitis (AS)



# What is AS?

Ankylosing spondylitis is pronounced an-ki-low-sing spon-de-lie-tis and is called AS for short.

AS is a painful, progressive form of inflammatory arthritis. It mainly affects the spine but can also affect other joints, tendons and ligaments.

Ankylosing means fusing together. Spondylitis means inflammation of the vertebrae. Both words come from the Greek language. Ankylosing spondylitis describes the condition where some or all of the joints and bones of the spine fuse together.

Other areas such as the eyes, bowel, lungs and heart can also be involved with AS.

AS affects an estimated 200,000 in the UK.

Research is still ongoing into the genetics of AS but researchers believe that up to 20 different genes must be involved.

Symptoms usually begin in early adult life, with the average age of diagnosis being 24.

AS is a very variable condition. Some people with AS have virtually no symptoms whereas others suffer much more severely. Generally people find that their symptoms come and go over many years.

There is currently no cure for AS. It is managed by a combination of pain relief and stretching exercises.

## **Does AS affect your employees ability to do their job?**

Many people with AS continue to have normal working lives. However, some common problems for people with AS in the workplace include:

- Pain and stiffness in the mornings means it is hard to get going first thing and get to work on time
- Sitting in one place or position can lead to pain and stiffness
- Problems with carrying out heavy manual work
- Not having the same amount energy or stamina and getting fatigued easily

AS, especially in its early stages, can be an invisible condition. People with AS are often battling on a daily basis against pain, stiffness and fatigue. This can lead to feelings of isolation, particularly just after diagnosis.

As well as the inevitable pain of the disease, AS often generates feelings of frustration and fear. To help them adjust to their diagnosis it is important that they have the support and encouragement of family, friends and work colleagues.

Even when AS is well managed, people can experience a 'flare up' of the condition. Flares can occur suddenly and without any warning signs: a person can be at work one day and be physically unable to get out of bed the next. Flares usually subside

within a couple of days but their frequency and severity varies greatly between individuals. Some people almost never experience flares, while others may have one or two a year.

Flares are often a difficult aspect of AS for colleagues to understand, particularly as a person experiencing a flare can look exactly the same as usual.

### **How can employers provide a supportive work environment for people with AS?**

Arrange a workplace assessment with an occupational therapist or an Access to Work Advisor. They may well be able to make some simple suggestions that make a lot of difference

Allow your employee to take regular short breaks from their workstation to stretch out.

Flexible working hours, particularly a later start, can help the employee to cope better with their life and in effect may mean they feel less tired. There may also be times during flare-ups of their illness when shorter working hours or, where possible, working from home would be helpful.

Travel can be a key issue for some people. They may find it difficult to take public transport and prefer to drive to work or to meetings. The provision of a parking space close to the place of work would help in these cases.

### **Is AS covered by the Equality Act 2010?**

Under the Equality Act a person has a disability if they have a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

AS is a condition which varies widely from one individual to another but where people have moderate to severe AS which impacts on their ability to carry out normal daily activities, they are likely to be covered by the Equality Act and will be entitled to reasonable adjustments at work.

NATIONAL ANKYLOSING SPONDYLITIS SOCIETY

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