

Understanding your referral to rheumatology

What is inflammatory back pain?

Back pain is very common and in most cases the pain is said to be 'mechanical' - that is, related to the way muscles, ligaments, discs and bones work together. For a small number of people (approximately 10%), the pain is due to inflammatory causes and sometimes means that people have a type of inflammatory arthritis in the spine called axial spondyloarthritis (axial SpA) – also commonly known as ankylosing spondylitis (AS). It is important to identify these people as there are many new treatments that can help. There is currently an average 8.5-year delay to diagnosis, therefore the National Ankylosing Spondylitis Society, Institute of Osteopathy and Royal College of Chiropractors are working together to speed up appropriate referral into rheumatology. Your practitioner has recognised your symptoms to be inflammatory and so they are referring you on to your GP.

What are the symptoms of axial SpA (AS)?

Typically, back pain in axial SpA (AS):

- Starts before the age of 40
- Lasts for at least 3 months
- Comes on slowly over time
- Is worse in the mornings
- Causes stiffness in the mornings
- Improves with exercise, and is worse at rest
- Improves with anti-inflammatory medication (e.g. ibuprofen)
- Can wake people from sleep, often in the second half of the night

How is axial SpA (AS) diagnosed?

It's important to be referred to a rheumatologist - a hospital specialist dealing with musculoskeletal problems. They can diagnose whether or not you have axial SpA (AS). Your rheumatologist may undertake some of the following tests:

- A physical examination to assess your flexibility and joint tenderness
- A blood test to measure inflammation and the HLA-B27 gene which can be associated with axial SpA (AS).
- X-rays to look for arthritis of your bones and joints
- Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to look for inflammation in your spine

If you would like to chat to someone about your referral and visit to a rheumatologist, you can contact the National Ankylosing Spondylitis Society Helpline

020 8741 1515 or email asknass@nass.co.uk, open 9am to midday, Monday to Friday



Working with Osteopaths and Chiropractors to improve AS knowledge

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