

Straight Talk

On Spondylitis



• Information From Experts



• Lifestyle & Exercise Tips



• Medications & More

Published by:



Straight Talk

On Spondylitis

Third Edition

Editor-in-Chief

Laurie M. Savage

Executive Director, Spondylitis Association of America

Associate Editor

Diann Peterson

Director of Membership & Communications, Spondylitis Association of America

Managing Editor

Melissa Velez Coelho

Director of Program Services, Spondylitis Association of America

Contributors

Robert A. Colbert, MD, PhD

John Reveille, MD

David Hallegua, MD

Scott P. Edwards

First Edition Authors

Rodney Bluestone, MD

Renee Z. Rinaldi, MD

Jane Bruckel, BSN, RN

Martin V. Cohen, PhD

John J. Cush, MD

Mary Rosenberg, PT

Sharon Gitman, PT

Dena M. Slonaker, OTR, MS Ed

Peter E. Lipsky, MD

Robert L. Swezey, MD

Illustrations

Mary Benz Deckert

Graphic Design & Layout

Christopher J. Miller

Design & Web Coordinator, Spondylitis Association of America

***The Third Edition of Straight Talk On Spondylitis is made possible by:
J.B. and Emily Van Nuys Charities and the Blank Charitable Foundation.***

Published by

Spondylitis Association of America

Straight Talk On Spondylitis (3rd Edition)
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Sherman Oaks, California

Printed in the United States of America
Printing by: Sundance Press, Inc.

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ISBN 978-1-881941-00-2

THIS BOOK IS NOT INTENDED AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR THE MEDICAL ADVICE OF PHYSICIANS. The activities, exercise programs and medication information contained in this book are for informational purposes only. Consult with your own physicians and/or physical therapists prior to beginning any activities or exercises to ensure that each activity or exercise is appropriate to your own individual needs and limitations. Participating without professional advice may lead to injuries or complications of pre-existing conditions.

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Forward

Whether you have been diagnosed with ankylosing spondylitis or a related condition, or if someone close to you has been diagnosed, spondyloarthritis (SpA) - also known as spondylitis - and its associated social, functional, and economic consequences will require you to make certain adjustments to your everyday life. It is especially important to take charge of the disease, since the experts agree that taking an active role in managing your condition, backed by a sound knowledge base, will have a positive influence on its outcome.

It should also be noted that how well you cope depends largely on your own attitude and subsequent actions. Reducing pain and stiffness, maintaining erect posture and preserving mobility can only be achieved when you learn the facts about spondylitis.

Since its effects can vary from person to person, not all of the information in this book may pertain to you. It is a “straightforward” look into the nature of ankylosing spondylitis and its related diseases. It is our hope that this book will provide important tools in the quest for optimum health.



Chapter 1: Understanding the Disease

In the 1960s, researchers set out to take a closer look at the skeletal changes that occur shortly after onset of ankylosing spondylitis, long before the disease has had a chance to progress. Researchers and clinicians are now referring to this as the pre-spondylitic stage. These studies into the initial stages of AS and related diseases provided the wealth of information on which we now base our knowledge of how these diseases progress and what it is that makes people with spondylitis hurt.

Why Spondylitis Hurts

The researchers found that the initial stage of spondylitis is inflammatory in nature. That is, inflammation takes place in body tissues, notably at the junction where ligaments, tendons or joint capsules attach to bone. (See figures 1a, 1b, 1c).

The areas of inflammation are actually made up of cells of the immune system called lymphocytes. These cells release chemicals that can destroy nearby tissue and stimulate certain nerve fibers that cause you to feel pain. (See figure 2).

When inflammation occurs deep in the spine, it affects the ligaments and muscles surrounding the spine, as well. The nerves that go to the inflamed structures deep in the spine also go to these surrounding ligaments and muscles, and the result is muscle spasm pain. Often the spasm is out of proportion to the severity of the underlying inflammation. This may explain the widespread, painful muscle spasms in the spinal area so often observed even early in the disease.

One critical discovery was determining the way in which the initial lesion (area of inflammation) changes over time. As the inflammation subsides, the lesion begins to heal by forming scar tissue, which replaces the destroyed cartilage or joint capsule. If this scar tissue is supplied by nerves, it may become very sensitive and an additional source of pain. In the final stage, the scar tissue has a tendency to calcify and turn into bone, which leads to a fusion of the joint. (See figure 1d).

Poor Posture and Fatigue

Although the initial inflammation can be quite painful, much of the pain and early sense of stiffness are a result of secondary muscle spasms. If the inflammatory process is left untreated, the muscle spasms and later scarring may force the person into a stooped posture. (See figure 3).

If fusion takes place with the person in a stooped position, then a further strain on the body results. This strain can cause more spasms and pain because the person is sitting, lying and walking with an improperly aligned skeleton. While it is rare for the spine to stiffen completely, you should do everything possible to maintain good posture so that if stiffening occurs, it will occur in an erect position.

Another byproduct of inflammation is fatigue. If extensive inflammation is present, your body must use energy to deal with it. Mild to moderate anemia, which may result from inflammation, occurs in many chronic diseases, including spondylitis, and may also contribute to a feeling of tiredness. Pain may cause sleepless nights that compound the tired feelings. Fortunately, treating the inflammation can help you overcome the fatigue and anemia.

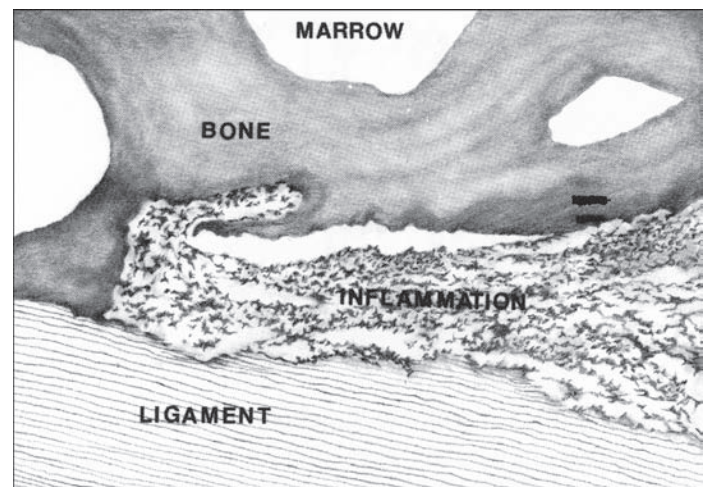


Figure 2: A nest of inflammatory cells as seen under magnification. These nests or pockets of inflammation occur where ligaments, tendons, or joint capsules join bone.