

## **Fatigue:**

As the AS flare takes its toll, you might feel completely wiped out.

Fatigue can be due to:

- Chemicals released by the body during the inflammation and healing cycle.
- Muscle tightness and imbalance.
- Disrupted sleep.
- Stress from living with a chronic inflammatory condition.
- Low mood and anxiety.

## **Flare Self-Management:**

### **Medication:**

We advise you take your medication, especially painkillers, as soon as you wake up and realise that you're having a flare. These include anti-inflammatories and painkillers, which can be obtained over the counter or from your GP. Please check that it is safe to have anti-inflammatories with your pharmacist or GP as they are not suitable for everyone. Some anti-inflammatory topical ointments may also help localised pain in joints. These can be taken in combination with biologic medication if you are also on this.

### **Breathe:**

Feelings of panic are common with the onset of a flare and can in turn cause more muscle tension and pain. Slowing your breathing allows more air through your lungs and will help you relax. It is a good idea to be familiar with some breathing exercises before you need them. Regularly practicing some breathing exercises can be great for your lung health and stress levels.

## **Understanding your axial SpA (AS) flares**

Axial SpA (AS) seems to have times of flare and times when it is more manageable or settled. A flare can include pain, stiffness, and fatigue. Understanding these features can help you to manage them.

### **What causes an AS Flare?**

Flares may be the results of "random" fluctuations in disease activity regardless of whether someone is being treated with a biologic, other anti-inflammatory medications, or not taking medications. Flares could be linked to situations of increased emotional stress or an episode of "overdoing it." Infections are another potential trigger.

Flare-ups also cannot always be controlled. Some people with ankylosing spondylitis may feel that their flare-ups have certain triggers. Knowing your triggers if you have any may help prevent flare-ups.

### **Symptoms of an AS Flare?**

#### **Pain can be due to:**

- Active inflammation in the tissues around the joints and tendons. This can be a very intense, raw type of pain.
- Shortening or tightening of muscles or tendons. This can lead to a dull, achy type of pain.
- Protective muscle spasms. This pain can be intense and sharp.

#### **Stiffness:**

You may experience stiffness in your lower back, hips and buttocks area and sometimes your neck. This can be due to:

- Muscles and tendons shortening and tightening.
- In some cases, new bone growth between the joints of the spine and in the pelvis.



**Kingston Hospital**  
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**Axial  
Spondyloarthritis  
(AS)  
Flare Self-  
management  
Patient Initiated Follow-  
Up (PIFU)**



### ***Diaphragmatic breathing for relaxation:***

Place one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach, just above your belly button. Relax your shoulders, allowing them to fall away from your ears.

1. Keeping your shoulders relaxed, take a slow, deep breath in through your nose, try to keep your chest and top-hand still but allow your belly and lower-hand to gently rise.
2. Gently breathe out through your mouth, allowing your stomach and lower hand fall.
3. Repeat for 3 breaths then return to normal breathing.

### ***Gently get moving:***

While in bed your spine, joints and muscles are warm and unaffected by the pull of gravity so it can be a good place to start moving.

Though it's tempting to curl up and go back to sleep it's a good idea to start moving your joints to alleviate stiffness. The key word here is GENTLE, a few simple exercises that you know well without aggravating your pain.

For example: lying on your back with your knees bent and gently rocking your knees from side to side. Check out the 'everyday stretches' on the NASS website and YouTube Channel which take you through some morning bed stretches.

### ***Getting out of bed:***

- Try to move in stages so you do not pull on muscles that are already in spasm.

- Move on the out breath - do not hold your breath while bracing yourself.
- Let your body adjust to each position before moving to the next one.
- Try rolling onto your side, taking your legs off the bed and pushing yourself up into a sitting position.

### ***Take a warm shower or bath:***

Warm water helps to relax tight muscles and release the stiffness in joints. It is also pain relieving.

You may find the jet of warm water from a shower helps to soothe sore areas, like a massaging effect. Soaking in a bath can also be soothing – if you can get in and out safely without causing more pain.

Try using a combination of Epsom salts and your favourite aromatherapy oils to help you relax and lift your mood. If you are not able to get in a shower or bath, a heat pack or hot water bottle is a good substitute.

***Make a plan:*** Accept that you may not be able to do everything you had planned today but do make smaller goals for the day and perhaps the days ahead.

***Move:*** Keeping moving is one of the main strategies for limiting the duration and intensity of your flare.

Try to go out for a short walk, even if it's just to the front gate! Natural daylight helps to lift the mood by releasing endorphins which in turn help you to cope with your pain.

Gently stretch the areas that tend to tighten up with your AS even if this feels uncomfortable. It should not be agonising or intensely painful but will likely be out of your "comfort zone".

### ***Pain relieving techniques:***

Aside from medication other techniques help:

***Heat and cold:*** Wheat or cherry stone packs or thermal heat stick-on packs can really help. Sometimes an alternating combination of heat and ice can stimulate blood supply locally to the painful area.

***Tens machine and pain pen:*** Learn the correct way to use them, the pulsed programme of impulses is better.

### ***Meditation or mindfulness***

***techniques:*** There are guided meditation apps, CDs and podcasts available to help.

### ***Include Rest in your routine:***

Flares may be triggered by over exertion. Take time to prioritise and plan out your day.

If you have attempted these methods without relief, please contact your Rheumatology Team. A combination of your symptoms and blood results will help your team decipher what action is needed. If your flares do become regular, you may require a medication review.

### ***Support:***

NASS (National Axial Spondyloarthritis Society)

<https://nass.co.uk/>

Rheumatology department contact number:

020 8934 6156 (option 2)

Rheumatology email address:

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