

Working with axial SpA

A guide for employers



Axial SpA
works silently.
We don't.

What is axial spondyloarthritis?

Axial spondyloarthritis (axial SpA) including ankylosing spondylitis is a painful, progressive form of inflammatory arthritis.

It mainly affects the spine but can also affect other joints, tendons and ligaments. For example, there can be inflammation and pain in the hips, knees and feet.

Other areas such as eyes (uveitis), gut (inflammatory bowel disease), skin (psoriasis), lungs and heart can also be involved.

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

Axial SpA (AS affects an estimated 200,000 people in the UK.)

Axial SpA is a very variable condition. Some people have mild symptoms whereas others suffer much more severely.

It is a condition which is managed by a hospital specialist. Medication is used to help reduce the inflammation and pain. Specialist physiotherapists prescribe exercises to reduce stiffness and maintain mobility.

How can axial SpA affect people at work?

Many people with axial SpA continue to have normal working lives. Some common problems in the workplace include:

- Pain and stiffness is most prevalent in the morning, slowly wearing off throughout the day. This can mean it is hard to get going first thing, which may lead to problems getting to work early.
- Sitting in one place or position can lead to pain and stiffness.
- Problems with carrying out heavy manual work.
- Not having the same amount of energy or stamina and getting fatigued easily.

Axial SpA especially in its early stages, can be an invisible condition. People 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, being diagnosed with a lifelong condition often generates feelings of frustration and fear.

To help people adjust to their diagnosis it is important that they feel they have the support and encouragement of family, friends and work colleagues.

“People with axial SpA are often battling on a daily basis against pain, stiffness and fatigue.”

Flares

Even when axial SpA is well controlled by medication, 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 may well subside within a couple of days but their frequency and severity varies greatly between individuals.

Flares can be a difficult aspect of axial SpA for colleagues to understand, particularly as a person experiencing a flare can look exactly the same as usual.

Biologic medication

Around a third of people with axial SpA will be treated with biologic therapy.

Biologic therapy works to stop the over-production of inflammation by the body. This means people prescribed this medication should experience less pain and stiffness.

Because biologic therapy affects the immune system, it means people are more vulnerable to picking up infections. It's a good idea to ask other staff to be mindful of this and to avoid coming

into work if they have a heavy cold or transmittable infection.

It also means people will find a viral infection affects them more severely. Again, staff should be mindful of transmitting viruses. In particular, people on biologic therapy need to avoid contact with anyone with chicken pox or shingles.

Providing a supportive work environment

There are a range of ways that you can support your employee in the workplace.

- Arrange a workplace assessment with an occupational therapist. 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 stand, stretch and move around.
- Flexible working hours, particularly a later start, can help your employee to cope better with their life and 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. If you do have company parking spaces it may be very helpful if you are able to offer them a reserved parking space.

“Allow your employee to take regular short breaks from their workstation.”

Support for you

The benefits to your business

Supporting your employee to continue working with their axial SpA has a number of benefits.

You can:

- Retain a skilled and valuable employee, saving both time and money recruiting a replacement.
- Increase productivity from your employee.
- Reduce sick leave.
- Encourage a diverse and varied workplace.

Access to Work is a specialist disability service providing financial support beyond the reasonable adjustments an employer is legally obliged to provide.

Fit for Work is a free service providing occupational health assessment and general health and work advice to employees, employers and GPs.

Find out more by visiting www.gov.uk.

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.

Axial SpA is a condition which varies widely from one individual to another. Where people have moderate to severe axial SpA 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.

In Northern Ireland, the Disabilities Discrimination Act applies. Visit www.nidirect.gov for more information.

How can your company support NASS?

NASS does not receive any government funding and relies solely on donations from its supporters to carry out our work for people affected by axial SpA.

Supporting NASS is a great way to motivate and engage staff through a range of fun and simple fundraising activities, whilst raising vital awareness of axial SpA. Your support can also help to meet your social responsibility objectives, increase engagement with new and existing customers, create positive PR opportunities and build relationships with colleagues.

Here are some ways that you and your company can help NASS to continue supporting all those affected by axial SpA.

Payroll Giving

Payroll Giving is an easy, tax-effective way to give to NASS. It enables employees to donate straight from their gross salary (before tax is deducted), and to receive immediate tax relief of up to £5 for every £10 donated, and it's easy to opt in and out of.

If you don't have a payroll giving programme, there is useful information on how to set one up on the Payroll Giving Centre website at www.payrollgivingcentre.org.uk

Employee fundraising

Bring colleagues together for fun events to support our work. From quiz nights to coffee mornings and bake sales, from sponsored silences to dress down days to organising a team step challenge or cycle, there's no limit to what you can do!

The fundraising team at NASS can help make your fundraising activity a success with t-shirts, fundraising packs, fundraising support and lots more! Please contact fundraising@nass.co.uk to find out more.

Matched funding

This is a really simple way to make a big difference to fundraising events that your employees take part in, potentially doubling their fundraising total.

Keep in touch!



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