Social Security Disability and Ankylosing Spondylitis

By Sandra Widlan on June 10, 2013

What is Ankylosing Spondylitis? Ankylosing spondylitis is an autoimmune disease that causes arthritis of the spine. Swelling occurs between the discs of the spine and in the joints between the spine and pelvis. Ankylosing spondylitis is more prevalent in men than women, and it frequently runs in families. Ankylosing spondylitis may cause the spine to become rigid and inflexible if bones start to grow together. Hip, shoulder, knee, and ankle joints may also be affected. Ankylosing spondylitis often causes pain and stiffness at night and in the early morning, or after any prolonged period of immobility.

How is Ankylosing Spondylitis Diagnosed? Ankylosing spondylitis is typically diagnosed by rheumatologists who are doctors specializing in problems involving joints, soft tissues, and autoimmune diseases. A rheumatologist will obtain a thorough history from the patient. The rheumatologist will also conduct a physical examination to determine whether there is any inflammation along the patient’s back and pelvis, and whether the patient has any difficulty bending or moving.

What about X-rays? The rheumatologist may order an x-ray to examine the sacroiliac joint in the pelvis for inflammation or erosion of the joint. However, since it can take 7 to 10 years before the disease causes erosion of the joint, an individual can have a normal x-ray and still have the disease. The use of an MRI to diagnose ankylosing spondylitis remains somewhat controversial.

Can a Blood Test Diagnose Ankylosing Spondylitis? There is no single blood test for Ankylosing Spondylitis. Some people with ankylosing spondylitis will test positive for the HLA-B27 gene. An abnormal erythrocyte sedimentation rate (a test of the red blood cells) also can be an indicator of ankylosing spondylitis. A diagnosis of ankylosing spondylitis does not involve rheumatoid factor (associated with rheumatoid arthritis) or antinuclear bodies (associated with lupus).

How Will Ankylosing Spondylitis Affect Me? For many people, ankylosing spondylitis only affects their back and joints, but for some it can affect their organs since it is a systemic disease. The severity of ankylosing spondylitis and a patient’s response to treatment varies from person to person. There is no cure for ankylosing spondylitis, but good posture, exercise, and medications are frequently recommended. If these measures fail,
sometimes surgery is an option.

**Should I apply for Social Security Disability benefits?** If you can no longer work due to your symptoms from ankylosing spondylitis, you may consider applying for Social Security Disability Insurance Benefits. You may be found eligible for benefits if:

- you have significant difficulty bending your back or neck due to ankylosis (fixation) of your spine;
- you have problems bending your back or neck and two or more of your other joints or organs are significantly affected, or
- you have severe fatigue, fever, or weight loss and significant difficulty engaging in daily activities, interacting with others, or concentrating.

If you have questions about whether to apply for Social Security Disability benefits, you should feel free to contact us. More information about ankylosing spondylitis can be found through the National Institute of Health, the University of Washington Medical Center, and the Social Security Administration.