

Arthritis: Hope. Education. Support. Solutions.

> ANKYLOSING SPONDYLITIS

Struck in the prime of life

"The good thing about being a teacher as opposed to an office worker is I can sit or stand and remain active. Otherwise my vertebrae would have fused."

BY TAMMY LABER

Ankylosing Spondylitis (AS) is a debilitating form of arthritis that mostly affects the spine but can also damage the ribs, shoulder blades and other areas. This chronic disease causes pain and stiffness and without treatment leads to the vertebrae fusing, decreasing mobility. Variety show host Ed Sullivan is said to have suffered from AS, which may explain why he moved his upper body rather than just his head when interviewing guests.

Nearly three times as many men as women suffer from the disease,

which affects between 150,000 and 300,000 Canadians.

Often striking men in their prime, AS takes on average five years to diagnose. During that time the disease progresses; damage to the spine may become irreversible. Yet, AS can be confirmed with a blood test.

According to Dr. Saeed A. Shaikh, a St. Catharines rheumatologist, one early symptom is back pain. "AS starts with pain in the lower back and buttocks. People with back pain often go to a chiropractor or massage therapist instead of a doctor. But you want to diagnose it earlier rather than later."

In later stages, AS is disfiguring: "The spine sets in a bent-over position, like a question mark. You're bent over, with almost a dowager's hump. The lower back flattens out and the upper back rounds over. Lying flat becomes impossible," Dr. Shaikh says.

David Atkins is a 38-year-old teacher and father of three who developed symptoms at age 16. Until recently his pain was so severe, he often had to be helped from bed. "I'd been suffering so long, I'd forgotten what it was like to move without pain and physical exhaustion," Mr. Atkins explains.

"The good thing about being a

teacher as opposed to an office worker is I can sit or stand and remain active. Otherwise my vertebrae would have fused," Mr. Atkins adds.

AS is an autoimmune disease – the immune system attacks healthy tissues for no obvious reason. Until recently, exercises and NSAIDs (aspirin and ibuprofen) were the only treatments. These helped with pain, but didn't prevent joint damage.

Now there's a new class of drugs that provides treatment for AS.

These drugs are biological response modifiers ("biologics") that reduce the effects of a substance made by the immune system called tumor necrosis factor alpha (TNF-alpha), which promotes inflammation in the body. These drugs specifically target TNF-alpha, inhibiting the substance and thereby reducing the inflammation and joint damage.

"This addresses the underlying cause of the disease, relieving signs and symptoms and improving physical function. The quality of life benefits can be quite dramatic," says Dr. Shaikh.

Among the biologic drugs now available is one distributed by Schering Canada and approved for treating AS last year. The therapeutic is administered to patients via intravenous infusion every six to eight weeks at 100 dedicated clinics operated by Schering across Canada. Mr. Atkins is among those receiving this new treatment.

"Before, all my energy was spent dealing with pain," he says. "Since I started the treatment, I can move around more easily and do the important things in life, like playing with my children, something other people take for granted."



PHOTO: SUPPLIED

Ankylosing Spondylitis (AS) affects between 150,000 and 300,000 Canadians, often striking men in their prime. New biologic drugs have been shown to more effectively treat inflammation caused by AS.

LIVING WELL

Rheumatoid arthritis

Types of medications that can help manage RA include:

- Non-Steroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDs)
- Corticosteroids
- Disease-Modifying Anti-Rheumatic Drugs (DMARDs)
- Biological Response Modifiers (Biologics)

Tips for managing RA:

- Use joints differently to avoid excess mechanical stress from tasks. Carry a heavy load close to the body, or use a cart to carry groceries.
- Exercise helps lessen symptoms of RA. Proper stretching, strengthening and low-impact exercises will help relieve pain and keep the muscles and tendons around the affected joint(s) flexible and strong.
- Good relaxation and coping skills can give people with RA a greater feeling of control. Using techniques such as deep breathing and meditation can relax the muscles around an inflamed joint and reduce pain.
- Some people with severe RA who have not responded to conservative management may benefit from surgery. Benefits include less pain, better movement and function.

For more tips, visit
www.arthritis.ca/types