

Script – Print – Not Your Typical Back Pain

Ankylosing Spondylitis is a Form of Arthritis That Affects the Spine

Mick Mars, best known as the lead guitarist for the legendary rock band Mötley Crüe, has spent a lifetime thrilling fans with his aggressive style of play. But he's also suffered for years with a disease called ankylosing spondylitis (AS) – a form of arthritis of the spine that causes inflammation between the vertebrae and in the joints between the spine and pelvis.

Mars once described his condition to a Boston radio station. "Of course I have days that are worse than others and there is always some amount of pain with my hips. There are good days and bad days but it is more of an inconvenience than anything else."

The 71-year-old rocker is not alone in this fight, but is in rare air when it comes to AS: about 300,000 people (less than 1% of the adult population) have this disease. While there is no known cause of AS, there may be a genetic link, according to medical experts. And while anyone can get AS, it tends to affect men more than women.

May 7 is World Ankylosing Spondylitis Day, a time for drawing awareness to this uncommon disease.

Symptoms generally appear between the ages of 17 and 45. Some people have consistent pain, while others experience milder symptoms.

"The most common symptoms are low back pain or posterior pelvic pain," says Rebekah Lesko, a physical therapist for OSF HealthCare. "It's a general low back pain or ache. Some people have trouble breathing because as the inflammation progresses and can cause fusion; it can affect the expansion of the rib cage as well. Another common side effect is inflammation or blurriness of vision because it can cause inflammation of the eye."

AS is a lifelong condition with no cure. While AS affects mostly the spine, it can also inflame joints in the pelvis, shoulders, hips and knees. People with AS are more likely to experience spinal fractures as well as osteoporosis and fused vertebrae.

"The best treatment for ankylosing spondylitis is maintaining a regular exercise regimen to keep the joints from fusing and keeping good posture," says Lesko. "There's also medical management through non-steroidal anti-inflammatory, anti-rheumatic drugs and in cases of severe inflammation, using steroids to decrease that inflammation as well."

Lesko knows all about AS, both professionally and personally. At 17, Lesko began developing serious back pain while helping her father bale hay on the family farm. The pain didn't go away so Lesko consulted with doctors and underwent a battery of tests before she was diagnosed with AS. As a three-sport athlete, Lesko struggled during her senior year of high school as she had to give up all activities, begin a regimen of medications and learn how to manage her symptoms.

"In my mid 20s I went off my medication and I was really well managed with physical activity," says Lesko. "I've had on a few occasions uveitis, which is the inflammation of the eye, where I have to use steroid drops, and steroid dose packs for flares of the back pain on occasion but at this point things are pretty well managed. I know the things to do to get the pain under control, which is usually gentle physical activity and staying in a regular regimen of exercise."

Lesko says the treatment of AS has drastically changed over time. Years ago, patients were not encouraged to move or take part in physical activity due to their condition. Now, physical therapists teach patients the importance of good posture and ergonomics to avoid prolonged positioning, along with breathing exercises and gentle stretches for the spine.

"The biggest thing is make sure you maintain your posture, stay active, don't give up on yourself, keep trying different things to manage the pain, get a good rheumatologist who can help you with that and find

a physical therapist who can help support you in that because you don't have to live in daily pain," says Lesko. "It can really be managed."

For more information about AS, visit [OSF HealthCare](#).