

Living Well

When arthritis strikes early



Ankylosing spondylitis usually affects those aged 20 to 45 and can cause severe immobility and deformity



Amrita Kaur

Young people are often shocked or in denial when told they have arthritis because they think it affects only the aged.

This may stem from how arthritis is often associated with rheumatism, and the perception that arthritis refers to osteoarthritis, which indeed affects older people more, says Dr Anindita Santosa, a consultant at Changi General Hospital's department of medicine (rheumatology).

However, ankylosing spondylitis, an arthritic condition, can set in at any age and usually affects those who are 20 to 45 years old.

Other types of arthritis that can strike young people include arthritis associated with autoimmune conditions, such as systemic lupus erythematosus, and juvenile idiopathic arthritis, which affects children.

Ankylosing spondylitis, in particular, affects joints of the spine, causing inflammation, severe pain and stiffness in the back.

As the condition progresses, the inflammation of the spinal joints may cause the whole spine to fuse together and lock in a bent position.

This leads to severe immobility and deformity, and can cause inflammation in the eyes and intestines.

While the cause of the condition is not known, there is a strong link to a gene called HLA-B27.

There is no public data on the incidence of inflammatory arthritis in young people in Singapore, but Dr Santosa estimates that two to five in 1,000 people here aged 17 and older have ankylosing spondylitis.

Dr Peter Cheung, a senior consultant at National University Hospital's division of rheumatology, often sees patients with this condition around the time of their national service.

"They are usually taken aback by such a diagnosis, but we tell them that this condition usually happens around their age, and they are often relieved that a diagnosis has been confirmed about the symptoms," he says.

The first symptoms are usually pain and stiffness in the lower back or buttocks region, especially after prolonged periods of inactivity.

Sufferers often report that their symptoms are worse when waking up in the morning and that they have difficulty getting out of bed, adds Dr Santosa, who chairs the medical committee at the National Arthritis Foundation.

The charitable organisation has more than 250 members, including people with arthritis and donors. It provides subsidies for needy arthritis patients, holds public forums to increase awareness of the condition and supports research on it.

There is no cure for ankylosing spondylitis, but it can be managed through lifestyle changes, regular exercise and medication. Quitting smoking also helps as it lowers inflammation in the body.

Pain and stiffness caused by the condition usually improve with exercise and movement, in contrast

with ordinary back strain, which improves with rest.

Patients may also experience pain and stiffness in the hips, knees and other joints in the feet, hands and chest. This may make activities such as walking, squatting and climbing stairs challenging.

Those with active inflammation in their spine may also lose flexibility and range of movement of their spine, making bending forward or looking over the shoulder difficult.

Dr Santosa says chronic active inflammation may also cause atherosclerosis, which occurs when plaque builds up inside the arteries.

She explains: "The blood vessels stiffen as a result of cholesterol deposition, and so delays in treatment also increase the patient's risk of cardiovascular diseases."

Dr Cheung notes that people sometimes do not see the doctor as they think their joint pain is due to physical activities, or is mild or intermittent.

Experts advise against waiting too long to seek help.

Dr Santosa says this may lead to worsening symptoms, irreversible joint damage, organ failure or potentially life-threatening conditions as a result of uncontrolled inflammation.

Dr Cheung says: "The condition can be managed very well and patients often go on to lead normal lives. The importance of diagnosis and treating early is to prevent irreversible joint damage and loss of physical function."

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• The National Arthritis Foundation is organising a fund-raiser called Ride For Hope to raise awareness of the disease. Participants can make a minimum donation of \$30 and cycle 10km, 40km or 100km from now till Oct 31. To register, go to rideforhope.sg

Living with arthritis

Two people diagnosed with the condition in their 20s open up about their challenges

Afraid to cross the road as her legs may go weak

As a teenager, Ms Adelin Wong often had pain in her lower back and legs. Sometimes, her body felt so stiff after a night's sleep, she would take as long as 15 minutes to get up.

She wrote it off as muscle pain, but five years ago, it became so unbearable she felt paralysed.

A doctor diagnosed her with ankylosing spondylitis, a type of arthritis which affects mainly the joints of the spine, causing inflammation, severe pain and stiffness in the back.

Ms Wong felt relieved because she finally understood the reason for her pain, but she was also shocked as she thought arthritis affected only the elderly.

Now 34 and a business analyst, Ms Wong says during her younger days, the pain sometimes got so intense that she would skip school as she found it hard to climb the stairs to her class on the third floor.

"I would then study at home and, sometimes, my friends would come over to my house to

help me with my homework," she adds.

She also could not participate in physical education lessons at times due to the pain.

Today, she still struggles with pain in her legs and back.

"There are instances where I experience a 'lightning bolt' pain in the buttocks when I step onto the floor, and walking from my bed to the bathroom can take as long as 20 minutes," she says.

On such days, she uses painkillers, topical pain patches and a walking stick to manage her condition.

"It's not the kind of pain that's easy to explain to people when they ask why you're limping. Sometimes, the pain will disappear just as quickly as it came. It makes people think that I'm faking it," she says.

As a result of her condition, she fears crossing the road as her legs may suddenly go weak.

Two years ago, she fell while alighting from a bus when her legs suddenly weakened. This happened during the third trimester of her pregnancy, but thankfully, she and her son, now 21 months old, did not sustain serious injury.

Her condition has also made it challenging for her to look after

Business analyst Adelin Wong, seen here with her son Lucas, started having pain in her lower back and legs as a teenager.
ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

her only child. Sometimes, she feels lethargic while carrying her son and, at other times, she is unable to run after him.

Because of this, she does not take him out alone and has a helper to look after him.

Even while lying in bed, Ms Wong is unable to get rid of the pain. She cannot turn or get up from the bed without the help of her husband, an operation leader in an offshore company.

"It makes me feel like crying and I feel useless every day. With this condition, I have cried more than I would like to admit," she says.

While ankylosing spondylitis is a progressive chronic disease, it is still possible for patients to live their lives fully.

Apart from taking medication to manage her condition, Ms Wong maintains a healthy diet and keeps herself active by attending taiji and yoga classes at the National Arthritis Foundation.

"The diagnosis is not a death sentence. There may be challenging times, but it is important to take charge of life and keep a positive attitude," she says.

Amrita Kaur

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