

# Spondyloarthritis in over 16s: diagnosis and management

NICE guideline

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[www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng65](https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng65)

## Your responsibility

The recommendations in this guideline represent the view of NICE, arrived at after careful consideration of the evidence available. When exercising their judgement, professionals and practitioners are expected to take this guideline fully into account, alongside the individual needs, preferences and values of their patients or the people using their service. It is not mandatory to apply the recommendations, and the guideline does not override the responsibility to make decisions appropriate to the circumstances of the individual, in consultation with them and their families and carers or guardian.

Local commissioners and providers of healthcare have a responsibility to enable the guideline to be applied when individual professionals and people using services wish to use it. They should do so in the context of local and national priorities for funding and developing services, and in light of their duties to have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, to advance equality of opportunity and to reduce health inequalities. Nothing in this guideline should be interpreted in a way that would be inconsistent with complying with those duties.

Commissioners and providers have a responsibility to promote an environmentally sustainable health and care system and should assess and reduce the environmental impact of implementing NICE recommendations wherever possible.

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This guideline is the basis of QS170.

This guideline should be read in conjunction with QS155 and NG193.

## Overview

This guideline covers diagnosing and managing spondyloarthritis that is suspected or confirmed in adults who are 16 years or older. It aims to raise awareness of the features of spondyloarthritis and provide clear advice on what action to take when people with signs and symptoms first present in healthcare settings. It also provides advice on the range of treatments available.

In June 2017, we updated recommendation 1.2.7 to clarify the advice on what imaging should be done.

NICE has also produced guidelines on [psoriasis](#) and [low back pain and sciatica in over 16s](#).

## Who is it for?

- Healthcare professionals
- Commissioners and providers
- People with spondyloarthritis and their families and carers

## Recommendations

People have the right to be involved in discussions and make informed decisions about their care, as described in [your care](#).

[Making decisions using NICE guidelines](#) explains how we use words to show the strength (or certainty) of our recommendations, and has information about prescribing medicines (including off-label use), professional guidelines, standards and laws (including on consent and mental capacity), and safeguarding.

Spondyloarthritis is a group of inflammatory conditions that have a range of manifestations. Spondyloarthritis may be predominantly:

- axial:
  - radiographic axial spondyloarthritis (ankylosing spondylitis)
  - non-radiographic axial spondyloarthritis or
- peripheral:
  - psoriatic arthritis
  - reactive arthritis
  - enteropathic spondyloarthritis.

People with predominantly axial spondyloarthritis may have additional peripheral symptoms, and vice versa.

Axial presentations of spondyloarthritis are often misdiagnosed as mechanical low back pain, leading to delays in access to effective treatments. Peripheral presentations are often seen as unrelated joint or tendon problems, and can be misdiagnosed because problems can move around between joints.

### 1.1 Recognition and referral in non-specialist care settings

1.1.1 Do not rule out the possibility that a person has spondyloarthritis solely on the

presence or absence of any individual sign, symptom or test result.

## Suspecting spondyloarthritis

- 1.1.2 Recognise that spondyloarthritis can have diverse symptoms and be difficult to identify, which can lead to delayed or missed diagnoses. Signs and symptoms may be musculoskeletal (for example, inflammatory back pain, enthesitis and dactylitis) or extra-articular (for example, uveitis and psoriasis [including psoriatic nail symptoms]). Risk factors include recent genitourinary infection and a family history of spondyloarthritis or psoriasis.
- 1.1.3 Be aware that axial and peripheral spondyloarthritis may be missed, even if the onset is associated with established comorbidities (for example, uveitis, psoriasis, inflammatory bowel disease [Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis], or a gastrointestinal or genitourinary infection).
- 1.1.4 Be aware that axial spondyloarthritis:
- affects a similar number of women as men
  - can occur in people who are human leukocyte antigen B27 (HLA-B27) negative
  - may be present despite no evidence of sacroiliitis on a plain film X-ray.

## Referral for suspected axial spondyloarthritis

- 1.1.5 If a person has low back pain that started before the age of 45 years and has lasted for longer than 3 months, refer the person to a rheumatologist for a spondyloarthritis assessment if **4 or more** of the following additional criteria are also present:
- low back pain that started before the age of 35 years (this further increases the likelihood that back pain is due to spondyloarthritis compared with low back pain that started between 35 and 44 years)
  - waking during the second half of the night because of symptoms
  - buttock pain
  - improvement with movement

- improvement within 48 hours of taking non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)
- a first-degree relative with spondyloarthritis
- current or past arthritis
- current or past enthesitis
- current or past psoriasis.

If exactly 3 of the additional criteria are present, perform an HLA-B27 test. If the test is positive, refer the person to a rheumatologist for a spondyloarthritis assessment.

- 1.1.6 If the person does not meet the criteria in recommendation 1.1.5 but clinical suspicion of axial spondyloarthritis remains, advise the person to seek repeat assessment if new signs, symptoms or risk factors listed in recommendation 1.1.5 develop. This may be especially appropriate if the person has current or past inflammatory bowel disease (Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis), psoriasis or uveitis (see recommendation 1.1.12 for guidance on referral for immediate [same-day] ophthalmological assessment for people with acute anterior uveitis).

## Referral for suspected psoriatic arthritis and other peripheral spondyloarthritides

- 1.1.7 For guidance on identifying spondyloarthritis in people with an existing diagnosis of psoriasis, see [assessment and referral for psoriatic arthritis in the NICE guideline on psoriasis](#).
- 1.1.8 Urgently refer people with suspected new-onset inflammatory arthritis to a rheumatologist for a spondyloarthritis assessment, unless rheumatoid arthritis, gout or acute calcium pyrophosphate (CPP) arthritis ('pseudogout') is suspected. If rheumatoid arthritis is suspected, see [referral for specialist treatment in the NICE guideline on rheumatoid arthritis in adults](#).
- 1.1.9 Refer people with dactylitis to a rheumatologist for a spondyloarthritis assessment.
- 1.1.10 Refer people with enthesitis without apparent mechanical cause to a

rheumatologist for a spondyloarthritis assessment if:

- it is persistent or
- it is in multiple sites or
- any of the following are also present:
  - back pain without apparent mechanical cause
  - current or past uveitis (see recommendation 1.1.12 for guidance on immediate [same-day] ophthalmological assessment for people with acute anterior uveitis)
  - current or past psoriasis
  - gastrointestinal or genitourinary infection
  - inflammatory bowel disease (Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis)
- a first-degree relative with spondyloarthritis or psoriasis.

## Recognising psoriasis

1.1.11 If a person with suspected spondyloarthritis has signs or symptoms of undiagnosed psoriasis, follow the recommendations in the NICE guideline on [psoriasis](#).

## Referral for suspected acute anterior uveitis

1.1.12 Refer people for an immediate (same-day) ophthalmological assessment if they have symptoms of acute anterior uveitis (for example, eye pain, eye redness, sensitivity to light or blurred vision).

## Case-finding in people with acute anterior uveitis

1.1.13 Ophthalmologists should ask people with acute anterior uveitis whether they have:

- consulted their GP about joint pains or
- experienced low back pain that started before the age of 45 years and has lasted for longer than 3 months.

1.1.14 If the person meets either of the criteria in recommendation 1.1.13, establish whether they have psoriasis or skin complaints that appear psoriatic on physical examination.

- If they do, refer the person to a rheumatologist for a spondyloarthritis assessment.
- If they do not, perform an HLA-B27 test. If the test is positive, refer the person to a rheumatologist for a spondyloarthritis assessment.

## 1.2 Diagnosing spondyloarthritis in specialist care settings

### Diagnostic criteria for suspected spondyloarthritis

1.2.1 In specialist care settings, consider using validated spondyloarthritis criteria to guide clinical judgement when diagnosing spondyloarthritis. Examples include:

- general spondyloarthritis criteria:
  - Amor
  - European Spondyloarthropathy Study Group (ESSG)
- axial spondyloarthritis criteria:
  - Assessment of Spondyloarthritis International Society (ASAS; axial)
  - Berlin
  - Rome
  - modified New York
- peripheral spondyloarthritis criteria:
  - ASAS (peripheral)
  - Classification of Psoriatic Arthritis (CASPAR)
- French Society of Rheumatology (reactive arthritis).

1.2.2 Do not rule out a diagnosis of spondyloarthritis solely on the basis of a negative HLA-B27 result.

- 1.2.3 Do not rule out a diagnosis of spondyloarthritis if a person's C-reactive protein (CRP) and erythrocyte sedimentation rate (ESR) are normal.

## Imaging for suspected axial spondyloarthritis

### Initial investigation using X-ray

- 1.2.4 Offer plain film X-ray of the sacroiliac joints for people with suspected axial spondyloarthritis, unless the person is likely to have an immature skeleton.
- 1.2.5 Diagnose radiographic axial spondyloarthritis (ankylosing spondylitis) if the plain film X-ray shows sacroiliitis meeting the modified New York criteria (bilateral grade 2–4 or unilateral grade 3–4 sacroiliitis).
- 1.2.6 If the plain film X-ray does not show sacroiliitis meeting modified New York criteria (bilateral grade 2–4 or unilateral grade 3–4 sacroiliitis), or an X-ray is not appropriate because the person's skeleton is not fully mature, request unenhanced MRI using an inflammatory back pain protocol.

### Subsequent investigation using MRI

- 1.2.7 Radiologists receiving a request for an inflammatory back pain MRI should perform short T1 inversion recovery (STIR) and T1 weighted sequences of the whole spine (sagittal view), and sacroiliac joints (coronal oblique view).
- 1.2.8 Use the ASAS/Outcome Measures in Rheumatology (OMERACT) MRI criteria to interpret the MRI as follows:
- If the MRI meets the ASAS/OMERACT MRI criteria:
    - diagnose non-radiographic axial spondyloarthritis.

- If the MRI does not meet the ASAS/OMERACT MRI criteria:
  - do not exclude the possibility of axial spondyloarthritis
  - consider specialist musculoskeletal radiology review if there is disparity between the clinical suspicion and imaging findings, particularly in people with an immature skeleton
  - offer an HLA-B27 test if it has not already been done. If positive, base the diagnosis of non-radiographic axial spondyloarthritis on clinical features, for example, using the clinical 'arm' of the ASAS axial classification criteria.

1.2.9 If a diagnosis of axial spondyloarthritis cannot be confirmed and clinical suspicion remains high, consider a follow-up MRI.

## Other types of imaging for diagnosing axial spondyloarthritis

1.2.10 Do not offer scintigraphy for people with suspected axial spondyloarthritis.

## Imaging for suspected psoriatic arthritis and other peripheral spondyloarthritides

1.2.11 Offer plain film X-ray of symptomatic hands and feet for people with suspected peripheral spondyloarthritis in these areas.

1.2.12 If a diagnosis cannot be made from the plain film X-ray, consider ultrasound of:

- the hands and feet to assess for joint involvement
- suspected enthesitis sites.

1.2.13 Consider plain film X-rays, ultrasound and/or MRI of other peripheral and axial symptomatic sites.

1.2.14 Interpret a positive HLA-B27 result as increasing the likelihood of peripheral spondyloarthritis.

1.2.15 If a diagnosis of peripheral spondyloarthritis is confirmed, offer plain film X-ray of the sacroiliac joints to assess for axial involvement, even if the person does not have any symptoms.

## Antibody testing for suspected reactive arthritis

- 1.2.16 Do not routinely test for infective antibody status to diagnose reactive arthritis in people with a history of gastrointestinal infection.

## 1.3 Information and support

### Information about spondyloarthritis

- 1.3.1 Provide people with spondyloarthritis, and their family members or carers (as appropriate), with information that is:

- available on an ongoing basis
- relevant to the stage of the person's condition
- tailored to the person's needs.

For more guidance on providing information to people and discussing their preferences with them, see the NICE guideline on [patient experience in adult NHS services](#).

- 1.3.2 Provide explanations and information about spondyloarthritis, for example:

- what spondyloarthritis is
- diagnosis and prognosis
- treatment options (pharmacological and non-pharmacological), including possible side effects
- likely symptoms and how they can be managed
- flare episodes and extra-articular symptoms
- self-help options
- opportunities for people with spondyloarthritis to be involved in research
- which healthcare professionals will be involved with the person's care and how to get in touch with them

- information about employment rights and ability to work
- local support groups, online forums and national charities, and how to get in touch with them.

## Information about disease flares

- 1.3.3 Advise people with spondyloarthritis about the possibility of experiencing flare episodes and extra-articular symptoms.
- 1.3.4 Consider developing a flare management plan that is tailored to the person's individual needs, preferences and circumstances.
- 1.3.5 When discussing any flare management plan, provide information on:
- access to care during flares (including details of a named person to contact [for example, a specialist rheumatology nurse])
  - self-care (for example, exercises, stretching and joint protection)
  - pain and fatigue management
  - potential changes to medicines
  - managing the impact on daily life and ability to work.

## 1.4 Pharmacological management of spondyloarthritis

### Axial spondyloarthritis

#### NSAIDs

- 1.4.1 Offer NSAIDs at the lowest effective dose to people with pain associated with axial spondyloarthritis, and think about appropriate clinical assessment, ongoing monitoring of risk factors, and the use of gastroprotective treatment.
- 1.4.2 If an NSAID taken at the maximum tolerated dose for 2–4 weeks does not provide adequate pain relief, consider switching to another NSAID.

### Biological DMARDs – adalimumab, certolizumab pegol, etanercept, golimumab and infliximab for the treatment of ankylosing spondylitis and non-radiographic

## axial spondyloarthritis

- 1.4.3 Adalimumab, certolizumab pegol, etanercept, golimumab and infliximab are recommended, within their marketing authorisations, as options for treating severe active ankylosing spondylitis in adults whose disease has responded inadequately to, or who cannot tolerate, NSAIDs. Infliximab is recommended only if treatment is started with the least expensive infliximab product. People currently receiving infliximab should be able to continue treatment with the same infliximab product until they and their NHS clinician consider it appropriate to stop.  
[This recommendation is from NICE's technology appraisal guidance on [TNF-alpha inhibitors for ankylosing spondylitis and non-radiographic axial spondyloarthritis](#).]
- 1.4.4 Adalimumab, certolizumab pegol and etanercept are recommended, within their marketing authorisations, as options for treating severe non-radiographic axial spondyloarthritis in adults whose disease has responded inadequately to, or who cannot tolerate, NSAIDs.  
[This recommendation is from NICE's technology appraisal guidance on [TNF-alpha inhibitors for ankylosing spondylitis and non-radiographic axial spondyloarthritis](#).]
- 1.4.5 The choice of treatment should be made after discussion between the clinician and the patient about the advantages and disadvantages of the treatments available. This may include considering associated conditions such as extra-articular manifestations. If more than 1 treatment is suitable, the least expensive (taking into account administration costs and patient access schemes) should be chosen.  
[This recommendation is from NICE's technology appraisal guidance on [TNF-alpha inhibitors for ankylosing spondylitis and non-radiographic axial spondyloarthritis](#).]
- 1.4.6 The response to adalimumab, certolizumab pegol, etanercept, golimumab or infliximab treatment should be assessed 12 weeks after the start of treatment. Treatment should only be continued if there is clear evidence of response, defined as:
- a reduction in the Bath Ankylosing Spondylitis Disease Activity Index (BASDAI) score to 50% of the pre-treatment value or by 2 or more units and

- a reduction in the spinal pain visual analogue scale (VAS) by 2 cm or more.

[This recommendation is from NICE's technology appraisal guidance on [TNF-alpha inhibitors for ankylosing spondylitis and non-radiographic axial spondyloarthritis](#).]

- 1.4.7 Treatment with another tumour necrosis factor (TNF)-alpha inhibitor is recommended for people who cannot tolerate, or whose disease has not responded to, treatment with the first TNF-alpha inhibitor, or whose disease has stopped responding after an initial response.

[This recommendation is from NICE's technology appraisal guidance on [TNF-alpha inhibitors for ankylosing spondylitis and non-radiographic axial spondyloarthritis](#).]

- 1.4.8 When using BASDAI and spinal pain VAS scores, healthcare professionals should take into account any physical, sensory or learning disabilities, or communication difficulties that could affect the responses to the questionnaires, and make any adjustments they consider appropriate.

[This recommendation is from NICE's technology appraisal guidance on [TNF-alpha inhibitors for ankylosing spondylitis and non-radiographic axial spondyloarthritis](#).]

## Biological DMARDs – secukinumab for the treatment of ankylosing spondylitis

- 1.4.9 Secukinumab is recommended, within its marketing authorisation, as an option for treating active ankylosing spondylitis in adults whose disease has responded inadequately to conventional therapy (NSAIDs or TNF-alpha inhibitors). The drug is recommended only if the company provides it with the discount agreed in the patient access scheme.

[This recommendation is from NICE's technology appraisal guidance on [secukinumab for active ankylosing spondylitis after treatment with non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs or TNF-alpha inhibitors](#).]

- 1.4.10 Assess the response to secukinumab after 16 weeks of treatment and only continue if there is clear evidence of response, defined as:

- a reduction in the BASDAI score to 50% of the pre-treatment value or by 2 or more units and

- a reduction in the spinal pain VAS by 2 cm or more.

[This recommendation is from NICE's technology appraisal guidance on [secukinumab for active ankylosing spondylitis after treatment with non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs or TNF-alpha inhibitors](#).]

- 1.4.11 When using BASDAI and spinal pain VAS scores, healthcare professionals should take into account any physical, sensory or learning disabilities, or communication difficulties that could affect the responses to the questionnaires, and make any adjustments they consider appropriate.

[This recommendation is from NICE's technology appraisal guidance on [secukinumab for active ankylosing spondylitis after treatment with non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs or TNF-alpha inhibitors](#).]

## Psoriatic arthritis and other peripheral spondyloarthritis

### Non-biological therapies

- 1.4.12 Consider local corticosteroid injections as monotherapy for non-progressive monoarthritis.

- 1.4.13 Offer standard disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs) to people with:

- peripheral polyarthritis
- oligoarthritis
- persistent or progressive monoarthritis associated with peripheral spondyloarthritis.

- 1.4.14 When deciding which standard DMARD to offer, take into account:

- the person's needs, preferences and circumstances (such as pregnancy planning and alcohol consumption)
- comorbidities such as uveitis, psoriasis and inflammatory bowel disease
- disease characteristics
- potential side effects.

- 1.4.15 If a standard DMARD taken at the maximum tolerated dose for at least 3 months does not provide adequate relief from symptoms, consider switching to or adding another standard DMARD.
- 1.4.16 Consider NSAIDs as an adjunct to standard DMARDs or biological DMARDs to manage symptoms. Use oral NSAIDs at the lowest effective dose for the shortest possible period of time, and think about appropriate clinical assessment, ongoing monitoring of risk factors, and the use of gastroprotective treatment.
- 1.4.17 If NSAIDs do not provide adequate relief from symptoms, consider steroid injections (local or intramuscular) or short-term oral steroid therapy as an adjunct to standard DMARDs or biological DMARDs to manage symptoms.
- 1.4.18 If extra-articular disease is adequately controlled by an existing standard DMARD but peripheral spondyloarthritis is not, consider adding another standard DMARD.

### Targeted synthetic DMARDs – apremilast for the treatment of psoriatic arthritis

- 1.4.19 For guidance on treating psoriatic arthritis with apremilast, see NICE's technology appraisal guidance on [apremilast for treating active psoriatic arthritis](#).

### Biological DMARDs – etanercept, infliximab and adalimumab for the treatment of psoriatic arthritis

- 1.4.20 Etanercept, infliximab and adalimumab are recommended for the treatment of adults with active and progressive psoriatic arthritis when the following criteria are met.
- The person has peripheral arthritis with 3 or more tender joints and 3 or more swollen joints, and

- The psoriatic arthritis has not responded to adequate trials of at least 2 standard DMARDs, administered either individually or in combination.

[This recommendation is from NICE's technology appraisal guidance on [etanercept](#), [infliximab](#) and [adalimumab](#) for the treatment of psoriatic arthritis.]

1.4.21 Treatment as described in 1.4.20 should normally be started with the least expensive drug (taking into account drug administration costs, required dose and product price per dose). This may need to be varied for individual patients because of differences in the method of administration and treatment schedules.

[This recommendation is from NICE's technology appraisal guidance on [etanercept](#), [infliximab](#) and [adalimumab](#) for the treatment of psoriatic arthritis.]

1.4.22 Etanercept, adalimumab or infliximab treatment should be discontinued in people whose psoriatic arthritis has not shown an adequate response using the Psoriatic Arthritis Response Criteria (PsARC) at 12 weeks. An adequate response is defined as an improvement in at least 2 of the 4 PsARC criteria (1 of which has to be joint tenderness or swelling score) with no worsening in any of the 4 criteria. People whose disease has a Psoriasis Area and Severity Index (PASI) 75 response at 12 weeks but whose PsARC response does not justify continuation of treatment should be assessed by a dermatologist to determine whether continuing treatment is appropriate on the basis of skin response (see [etanercept](#) and [efalizumab](#) for the treatment of adults with psoriasis [NICE technology appraisal guidance 103], [infliximab](#) for the treatment of adults with psoriasis [NICE technology appraisal guidance 134] and [adalimumab](#) for the treatment of adults with psoriasis [NICE technology appraisal guidance 146] for guidance on the use of TNF inhibitors in psoriasis).

[This recommendation is from NICE's technology appraisal guidance on [etanercept](#), [infliximab](#) and [adalimumab](#) for the treatment of psoriatic arthritis.]

1.4.23 When using the PsARC healthcare professionals should take into account any physical, sensory or learning disabilities, or communication difficulties that could affect a person's responses to components of the PsARC and make any adjustments they consider appropriate.

[This recommendation is from NICE's technology appraisal guidance on [etanercept](#), [infliximab](#) and [adalimumab](#) for the treatment of psoriatic arthritis.]

## Biological DMARDs – golimumab for the treatment of psoriatic arthritis

1.4.24 Golimumab is recommended as an option for the treatment of active and progressive psoriatic arthritis in adults only if:

- it is used as described for other TNF-inhibitor treatments in [etanercept, infliximab and adalimumab for the treatment of psoriatic arthritis](#) (NICE technology appraisal guidance 199; see recommendations 1.4.20–1.4.23 in this guideline) and
- the manufacturer provides the 100 mg dose of golimumab at the same cost as the 50 mg dose.

[This recommendation is from NICE's technology appraisal guidance on [golimumab for the treatment of psoriatic arthritis](#).]

1.4.25 When using the PsARC (as set out in NICE technology appraisal guidance 199; see recommendations 1.4.20–1.4.23 in this guideline), healthcare professionals should take into account any physical, sensory or learning disabilities, or communication difficulties that could affect a person's responses to components of the PsARC and make any adjustments they consider appropriate.

[This recommendation is from NICE's technology appraisal guidance on [golimumab for the treatment of psoriatic arthritis](#).]

## Biological DMARDs – ustekinumab for the treatment of psoriatic arthritis

1.4.26 Ustekinumab is recommended as an option, alone or in combination with methotrexate, for treating active psoriatic arthritis in adults only when:

- treatment with TNF-alpha inhibitors is contraindicated but would otherwise be considered (as described in NICE technology appraisal guidance on [etanercept, infliximab and adalimumab for the treatment of psoriatic arthritis](#) [NICE technology appraisal guidance 199; see recommendations 1.4.20–1.4.23 in this guideline], and [golimumab for the treatment of psoriatic arthritis](#) [NICE technology appraisal guidance 220; see recommendations 1.4.24 and 1.4.25 in this guideline]) or

- the person has had treatment with 1 or more TNF-alpha inhibitors.

Ustekinumab is recommended only if the company provides the 90 mg dose of ustekinumab for people who weigh more than 100 kg at the same cost as the 45 mg dose, as agreed in the patient access scheme.

[This recommendation is from NICE's technology appraisal guidance on [ustekinumab for treating active psoriatic arthritis](#).]

- 1.4.27 Ustekinumab treatment should be stopped if the person's psoriatic arthritis has not shown an adequate response using the PsARC at 24 weeks. An adequate response is defined as an improvement in at least 2 of the 4 criteria (1 of which must be joint tenderness or swelling score), with no worsening in any of the 4 criteria. As recommended in NICE technology appraisal guidance on [etanercept, infliximab and adalimumab for the treatment of psoriatic arthritis](#) (see recommendations 1.4.20–1.4.23 in this guideline), people whose disease has a PASI 75 response but whose PsARC response does not justify continuing treatment should be assessed by a dermatologist to determine whether continuing treatment is appropriate on the basis of skin response (see NICE technology appraisal guidance on [ustekinumab for the treatment of adults with moderate to severe psoriasis](#)).

[This recommendation is from NICE's technology appraisal guidance on [ustekinumab for treating active psoriatic arthritis](#).]

- 1.4.28 When using the PsARC healthcare professionals should take into account any physical, sensory or learning disabilities, or communication difficulties that could affect a person's responses to components of the PsARC and make any adjustments they consider appropriate.

[This recommendation is from NICE's technology appraisal guidance on [ustekinumab for treating active psoriatic arthritis](#).]

- 1.4.29 People whose treatment with ustekinumab is not recommended in this NICE guidance, but was started within the NHS before this guidance was published, should be able to continue ustekinumab until they and their NHS clinician consider it appropriate to stop.

[This recommendation is from NICE's technology appraisal guidance on [ustekinumab for treating active psoriatic arthritis](#).]

## Reactive arthritis

### Antibiotics

- 1.4.30 After treating the initial infection, do not offer long-term (4 weeks or longer) treatment with antibiotics solely to manage reactive arthritis caused by a gastrointestinal or genitourinary infection.

## 1.5 Non-pharmacological management of spondyloarthritis

- 1.5.1 Refer people with axial spondyloarthritis to a specialist physiotherapist to start an individualised, structured exercise programme, which should include:
- stretching, strengthening and postural exercises
  - deep breathing
  - spinal extension
  - range of motion exercises for the lumbar, thoracic and cervical sections of the spine
  - aerobic exercise.
- 1.5.2 Consider hydrotherapy as an adjunctive therapy to manage pain and maintain or improve function for people with axial spondyloarthritis.
- 1.5.3 Consider a referral to a specialist therapist (such as a physiotherapist, occupational therapist, hand therapist, orthotist or podiatrist) for people with spondyloarthritis who have difficulties with any of their everyday activities. The specialist therapist should:
- assess people's needs
  - provide advice about physical aids
  - arrange periodic reviews to assess people's changing needs.

## 1.6 Surgery for spondyloarthritis

- 1.6.1 Do not refer people with axial spondyloarthritis to a complex spinal surgery

service to be assessed for spinal deformity correction unless the spinal deformity is:

- significantly affecting their quality of life and
- severe or progressing despite optimal non-surgical management (including physiotherapy).

1.6.2 If a person with axial spondyloarthritis presents with a suspected spinal fracture, refer them to a specialist to confirm the spinal fracture and carry out a stability assessment. After the stability assessment, the specialist should refer people with a potentially unstable spinal fracture to a spinal surgeon.

## 1.7 Managing flares

1.7.1 Manage flares in either specialist care or primary care depending on the person's needs.

1.7.2 When managing flares in primary care, seek advice from specialist care as needed, particularly for people who:

- have recurrent or persistent flares
- are taking biological DMARDs
- have comorbidities that may affect treatment or management of flares.

1.7.3 Be aware that uveitis can occur during flare episodes. See recommendation 1.1.12 for guidance on immediate (same-day) ophthalmological assessment for people with acute anterior uveitis.

## 1.8 Long-term complications

1.8.1 For guidance on monitoring long-term pharmacological treatments, see the NICE guideline on [medicines optimisation](#).

1.8.2 Take into account the adverse effects associated with NSAIDs, standard DMARDs and biological DMARDs when monitoring spondyloarthritis in primary care.

- 1.8.3 Advise people that there may be a greater risk of skin cancer in people treated with TNF-alpha inhibitors.
- 1.8.4 Discuss risk factors for cardiovascular comorbidities with all people with spondyloarthritis.
- 1.8.5 Consider regular osteoporosis assessments (every 2 years) for people with axial spondyloarthritis. Be aware that bone mineral density measures may be elevated on spinal dual-energy X-ray absorptiometry (DEXA) due to the presence of syndesmophytes and ligamentous calcification, whereas hip measurements may be more reliable.
- 1.8.6 Advise people with axial spondyloarthritis that they may be prone to fractures, and should consult a healthcare professional following falls or physical trauma, particularly in the event of increased musculoskeletal pain.

## 1.9 Organisation of care

### Coordinating care across settings

- 1.9.1 Commissioners should ensure that local arrangements are in place to coordinate care for people across primary and secondary (specialist) care. These should cover:
- prescribing NSAIDs and standard DMARDs
  - monitoring NSAIDs, standard DMARDs and biological DMARDs
  - managing flares
  - ensuring prompt access to specialist rheumatology care when needed
  - ensuring prompt access to other specialist services to manage comorbidities and extra-articular symptoms.
- 1.9.2 Ensure that people with spondyloarthritis have access to specialist care in primary or secondary care settings throughout the disease course to ensure optimal long-term spondyloarthritis management (see section 1.7 for arrangements for managing flares).

- 1.9.3 Ensure that there is effective communication and coordination between all healthcare professionals involved in the person's care, particularly if the person has comorbidities or extra-articular symptoms.
- 1.9.4 Ensure that there is communication and coordination between rheumatology and other relevant specialities (such as dermatology, gastroenterology and ophthalmology). This is particularly important for people who:
- are already receiving standard DMARDs or biological DMARDs for another condition
  - need to start taking standard DMARDs or biological DMARDs for another condition.
- 1.9.5 For guidance on managing the transition of young people with juvenile idiopathic arthritis to adult services, see the NICE guideline on [transition from children's to adults' services for young people using health or social care services](#).

## Putting this guideline into practice

NICE has produced [tools and resources](#) to help you put this guideline into practice.

Putting recommendations into practice can take time. How long may vary from guideline to guideline, and depends on how much change in practice or services is needed. Implementing change is most effective when aligned with local priorities.

Changes recommended for clinical practice that can be done quickly – like changes in prescribing practice – should be shared quickly. This is because healthcare professionals should use guidelines to guide their work – as is required by professional regulating bodies such as the General Medical and Nursing and Midwifery Councils.

Changes should be implemented as soon as possible, unless there is a good reason for not doing so (for example, if it would be better value for money if a package of recommendations were all implemented at once).

Different organisations may need different approaches to implementation, depending on their size and function. Sometimes individual practitioners may be able to respond to recommendations to improve their practice more quickly than large organisations.

Here are some pointers to help organisations put NICE guidelines into practice:

- 1. Raise awareness** through routine communication channels, such as email or newsletters, regular meetings, internal staff briefings and other communications with all relevant partner organisations. Identify things staff can include in their own practice straight away.
- 2. Identify a lead** with an interest in the topic to champion the guideline and motivate others to support its use and make service changes, and to find out any significant issues locally.
- 3. Carry out a baseline assessment** against the recommendations to find out whether there are gaps in current service provision.
- 4. Think about what data you need to measure improvement** and plan how you will collect it. You may want to work with other health and social care organisations and specialist groups to compare current practice with the recommendations. This may also help identify local issues that will slow or prevent implementation.

5. **Develop an action plan**, with the steps needed to put the guideline into practice, and make sure it is ready as soon as possible. Big, complex changes may take longer to implement, but some may be quick and easy to do. An action plan will help in both cases.

6. For **very big changes** include milestones and a business case, which will set out additional costs, savings and possible areas for disinvestment. A small project group could develop the action plan. The group might include the guideline champion, a senior organisational sponsor, staff involved in the associated services, finance and information professionals.

7. **Implement the action plan** with oversight from the lead and the project group. Big projects may also need project management support.

8. **Review and monitor** how well the guideline is being implemented through the project group. Share progress with those involved in making improvements, as well as relevant boards and local partners.

NICE provides a comprehensive programme of support and resources to maximise uptake and use of evidence and guidance. See our [into practice](#) pages for more information.

Also see Leng G, Moore V, Abraham S, editors (2014) [Achieving high quality care – practical experience from NICE](#). Chichester: Wiley.

## Context

Spondyloarthritis encompasses a group of inflammatory conditions with some shared features, including extra-articular manifestations. Both peripheral and axial joints can be affected. The spondyloarthritides are distinct from rheumatoid arthritis but are as important to recognise and manage early in their presentation to improve health outcomes.

Most people with these conditions have either psoriatic arthritis or axial spondyloarthritis, which includes ankylosing spondylitis. Ankylosing spondylitis and non-radiographic axial spondyloarthritis primarily affect the spine, in particular the sacroiliac joint. Both conditions present in similar ways; the primary classification difference is whether sacroiliitis is detectable on X-ray.

Psoriatic arthritis may manifest in a number of different patterns. These include predominant involvement of small joints in the hands and feet, predominant large joint involvement, particularly in the knees, or combinations of these. Psoriatic arthritis may also involve the axial joints, and inflammation of the entheses and/or finger and toe joints. Skin and nail involvement may not be present at diagnosis and in its absence, a family history of psoriasis is required to meet the diagnostic criteria.

Less common subgroups are enteropathic spondyloarthritis, which is associated with inflammatory bowel disease (Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis), and reactive arthritis, which can occur in people after gastrointestinal or genitourinary infections.

The final subgroup is people who have undifferentiated spondyloarthritis. These people generally have an asymmetrical oligoarticular (fewer than 5 involved joints) arthritis, often involving the knees. They do not meet the diagnostic criteria of the other subgroups at presentation but their disease may evolve to do so at a later stage.

This guideline also includes people who are 16 years or older with axial or peripheral symptoms who have previously been diagnosed with juvenile idiopathic arthritis.

Healthcare professionals in non-specialist settings do not always recognise the signs and symptoms of spondyloarthritis, particularly spinal symptoms, which may be mistakenly attributed to other causes of low back pain. This can lead to substantial delays in diagnosis and treatment with consequent disease progression and disability. This guideline seeks to raise awareness of the features of spondyloarthritis and provide clear advice on what action to take when people with

signs and symptoms first present in healthcare settings.

This guideline also provides advice on the interventions available to people with spondyloarthritis. These include pharmacological and non-pharmacological treatments, and surgery. The guidance also provides advice on how care for people with spondyloarthritis should be organised across healthcare settings, and what information and support should be provided.

## More information

You can also see this guideline in the NICE pathway on [spondyloarthritis](#).

To find out what NICE has said on topics related to this guideline, see our web pages on [musculoskeletal conditions](#) and [psoriasis](#).

See also the guideline committee's discussion and the evidence reviews (in the [full guideline](#)), and information about [how the guideline was developed](#), including details of the committee.

# Recommendations for research

The guideline committee has made the following recommendations for research. The committee's full set of research recommendations is detailed in the [full guideline](#).

## 1 Referral criteria for people with suspected axial spondyloarthritis

What are the optimal referral criteria for people with suspected axial spondyloarthritis?

### Why this is important

The Dutch CaFaSpA study (van Hooft et al. 2014, 2015) should be repeated in a UK population. This would involve examining GP databases to identify a cohort of people who have a diagnosis of non-specific back pain who first consulted their GP for back symptoms under the age of 45. These people would be invited for a full rheumatological assessment (including identifying signs and symptoms relevant to axial spondyloarthritis, X-ray, MRI and HLA-B27 test). All participants would be given a reference-standard diagnosis of axial spondyloarthritis or not (ideally using expert clinician opinion, or if this is not possible, using the ASAS [Assessment of Spondyloarthritis International Society] classification criteria). The cohort would be split into a development and validation set, to derive and validate optimal rules for case-finding from the available data, with each candidate strategy judged according to expected cost per quality-adjusted life year (QALY) gained (the NICE economic model developed for this guideline could easily be used to estimate these).

As a result of the large number of permutations of possible referral strategies, it is impractical to run separate validation studies for all referral criteria that are developed. Therefore, a single large, representative cohort study would, provided it measured the predictor variables for all reasonable referral strategies, provide the ability to develop and validate any number of possible referral strategies. The study would need to be large enough that sufficient data are available to derive new referral rules and to validate those rules in a separate, independent subset of the data. A UK-specific dataset would provide more relevant data to do this than is currently available from the Dutch CaFaSpA study. For example, that study found an HLA-B27 prevalence of 20% in people with axial spondyloarthritis and 2% in people without; much lower than the estimates found elsewhere (75% and 20% respectively). This lowers the validity of extrapolating any results found to the UK, and reinforces the need for UK-specific data to address this question.

## 2 Long-term complications of spondyloarthritis

What is the incidence of long-term complications, in particular osteoporosis, cardiovascular disease (CVD) and metabolic syndrome, in people with spondyloarthritis, and how does this compare with the general population? Are any specific spondyloarthritis features or risk factors associated with the incidence and outcomes of these complications?

### Why this is important

Spondyloarthritides are a group of systemic inflammatory conditions, and as such it is thought that people with these conditions may have an elevated risk of CVD, particularly if their disease is not adequately controlled. This may have direct vascular effects as well as precluding maintenance of a good level of cardiovascular fitness.

There is also clinical uncertainty around the long-term use of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs): whether the long-term CVD risks associated with this class of drugs are observed in this population, or whether the suppression of inflammation with these drugs mitigates some of the CVD risks associated with these conditions. In addition, risks of osteoporosis and fracture are known to be higher in people with axial spondyloarthritis than the general population, and the prevalence of axial manifestations in people diagnosed with peripheral disease implies the risks may also be high in peripheral spondyloarthritis.

The longer-term complication rates in the spondyloarthritides need to be established, as well as whether standard biological disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drug (DMARD) therapies and biological DMARDs influence these outcomes. Research that evaluates incidence of osteoporosis, CVD and metabolic syndrome in people with either axial or peripheral spondyloarthritis compared with the general population would therefore be of value. This research should take into account disease stage, personal activity levels and medicine use, and look to address how frequently it is appropriate to monitor people with spondyloarthritis for long-term complications.

## 3 Educational intervention to improve healthcare professionals' awareness of spondyloarthritis

What is the effectiveness and cost effectiveness of educational interventions for healthcare professionals in order to increase the number of prompt diagnoses of spondyloarthritis?

## Why this is important

One of the major reasons for the delays in diagnosing spondyloarthritis is a lack of awareness of the condition by healthcare professionals. This can take many forms, such as a lack of awareness of different spondyloarthritis subtypes, lack of knowledge about associated clinical features (for example, the differences between inflammatory and mechanical back pain) or characteristics of the patient populations (for example, that spondyloarthritis affects similar numbers of men and women, or that a substantial proportion of people with spondyloarthritis are HLA-B27 negative). Educational interventions to improve the level of awareness may therefore lead to reductions in diagnosis delays, but there is a lack of evidence as to the efficacy of these interventions. Randomised controlled trials of structured educational interventions are therefore needed to assess both whether they reduce the length of time it takes for people to be correctly diagnosed, and whether they represent a cost-effective use of NHS resources.

## 4 Pharmacological management of peripheral spondyloarthritis

What is the comparative effectiveness and cost effectiveness of standard DMARDs for managing peripheral spondyloarthritis, and is this effectiveness affected by differences in dose escalation protocols?

### Why this is important

The committee noted that, although there are a number of randomised controlled trials comparing standard DMARDs with placebo for managing peripheral spondyloarthritis, there is a lack of evidence comparing individual standard DMARDs to other standard DMARDs. This lack of evidence makes it difficult to optimise initial therapy, either by specifying specific drugs within the class or optimising dose, administration and monitoring protocols. There is therefore the need for randomised controlled trials looking at alternative drug, dosing and administration route alternatives for the administration of standard DMARDs for managing peripheral spondyloarthritis. These trials should ensure NSAIDs and steroids are available to participants as needed, and should include (as outcome measures) both health-related quality of life (measured using the EQ-5D) and health service resource use, to enable the results to be used to assess the cost effectiveness of the interventions.

## 5 Biological therapies for peripheral spondyloarthritis

What is the effectiveness and cost effectiveness of biological DMARDs in people with persistent

peripheral spondyloarthritis (excluding psoriatic arthritis) or undifferentiated spondyloarthritis?

## Why this is important

Although there have been trials conducted of biological therapies for psoriatic arthritis, which have led to positive recommendations in NICE technology appraisals, no such good-quality evidence exists in enteropathic arthritis, reactive arthritis or undifferentiated spondyloarthritis. The substantial side effects possible with biological therapies, and their significant cost, means it is difficult to justify offering them to these groups without good evidence of efficacy. There is therefore the need for randomised controlled trials, with a sufficient sample size to identify possible benefits, in these 3 populations. If trials were to recruit participants from multiple spondyloarthritis subpopulations, results should be clearly stratified by diagnosis to enable any differences in benefits or harms between the groups to be identified. These trials should include (as outcome measures) both health-related quality of life (measured using the EQ-5D) and health service resource use, to enable the results to be used to assess the cost effectiveness of the interventions.

## Update information

May 2017: Recommendation 1.2.7 was amended to clarify the advice on what imaging should be done.

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## Accreditation

