



Health and Wellness Program



PARTNERING
WITH



→ COMPLICATIONS OF SICKLE CELL ANEMIA

In the United States, sickle cell anemia affects over 70,000 individuals. It is most common in those whose ancestors came from Africa, Central America, Cuba, South America, Turkey, Greece or Italy. Normal red blood cells are round in shape. People with sickle cell anemia have crescent or sickle-shaped red blood cells. These sickle-shaped red blood cells get caught in narrow blood vessels, blocking the flow of blood. When parts of the body do not receive enough oxygen-rich blood, pain and tissue damage can occur, causing many different medical problems.

Pain. This is one of the primary symptoms of sickle cell anemia. It can occur anywhere in the body at any time. The pain may be mild and last only a few hours. Sometimes it can be severe and last for days. For severe pain, treatment in the hospital may be necessary. One of the first symptoms of sickle cell disease is called “hand-foot syndrome.” This is when pain, swelling of the hands and feet, and fever occur.

Swelling of the spleen. The spleen is a small organ. It removes bacteria from the blood. If sickle cells



become trapped in the blood vessels that leave the spleen, it can become very swollen and painful. If the spleen swells too quickly, red blood cell counts may drop. When red blood cell counts fall to low, a life-threatening emergency may occur.

Infections. People with sickle cell anemia get infections easier. Sickle-shaped red blood cells damage the spleen so it cannot destroy bacteria in the blood stream. This can lead to serious life-threatening infections like:

- Sepsis (infection of the blood)
- Meningitis (infection of the lining of the brain)
- Pneumonia (infection of the lungs), and
- Osteomyelitis (infection of the bone).

Anemia. Anemia is a shortage of red blood cells. Feeling tired, short of breath, and looking pale are three common symptoms of anemia. There is a shortage of red blood cells because sickle-shaped red blood cells only live 10 to 20 days. Normal round-shaped red blood cells live 120 days.

Juandice. Yellowing of the skin and eyes, or jaundice, happens when red blood cells break down and leave a substance called bilirubin in the blood. Gallstones can form when there is too much bilirubin in the blood. Gallstones block bile

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from flowing into the bowels and pancreas, which can cause pain and infection. Gallstones may require treatment in the hospital.

Vision problems. The retina is located at the back of the eye. When not enough blood reaches the retina, vision may be affected. This can lead to blindness.

Other conditions related to sickle cell disease are stroke, high blood pressure, chronic lung disease, kidney failure, delayed growth and puberty, and leg ulcers.

When to call your provider

It is sometimes hard to know when to treat symptoms at home or when you need to get medical attention. If you have any of the symptoms listed below, you should seek medical attention right away:

- Swollen hands or feet
- Sores on the legs
- Sudden paleness of the skin or nail beds
- Yellow color of the skin or eyes
- Fever
- Swelling in the belly
- Sudden tiredness
- Erection of the penis that won't go away
- Trouble hearing or seeing
- Weakness on one side of the body
- Sudden change in speech
- Headache



- Trouble breathing
- Joint, stomach, chest or muscle pain
- Difficulty walking or limping

If untreated, these symptoms may become life-threatening. Early medical treatment results in the best chance of a full recovery.

Living with sickle cell anemia

Having sickle cell anemia doesn't mean you can't live a normal healthy life. Remember these important steps:

- Keep all appointments with your health care providers.
- Take medications exactly as your provider instructs.
- Follow a healthy eating plan.
- Drink at least eight glasses of water every day, especially in warm weather.
- Try to do regular physical activity but don't over do it. Talk to your provider about activities that are right for you.

- Get plenty of rest and tell your provider if you are having problems like snoring.
- Keep current on immunizations, and remember to get a flu shot every year in the fall.
- If you smoke, stop. Talk to your provider about a program to help you quit.
- Avoid extreme heat and cold, including swimming in cold water.
- Reduce stress in your life. Join a support group. Talk to your provider if you feel down or stressed.

Resources

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute

Si no habla o lea ingles llámé al 1-800-447-6804 para solicitar asistencia. Podemos asistirle si no hable o no comprenda ingles.