



# QUESTIONS QUESTIONS & ANSWERS ANSWERS

## Sickle Cell Anemia

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Sickle cell anemia is a blood disease. Blood is made up of several things. One part of blood is red blood cells. The red blood cells carry oxygen to all parts of the body. A good supply of oxygen is important to have energy. Normal red blood cells are round, smooth and bendable. They flow easily through the blood vessels.

People with sickle cell anemia have red blood cells that can change shape. For some reason they become shaped like a sickle. The name sickle comes from a tool that has a curved blade. It is shaped like the letter C or a crescent moon.

Sickle cells are hard and pointy. As they travel through the blood vessels they break apart and clog blood flow. When this happens it is a sickle cell crisis. This painful condition happens when something triggers the red blood cells to change their shape to a sickle. It also causes anemia. Anemia means your body does not have enough red blood cells to carry oxygen through the body. Anemia makes you feel tired and weak.

Some people with sickle cell anemia have only one crisis a year. Others have them more often. If they have more than one they are called crises (say cry-ceeds).

### **The Signs of a Sickle Cell Crisis**

- Fever
- The skin and whites of the eyes turn yellow (jaundice)
- Chest pain

- Shortness of breath

### How Do You Get Sickle Cell Anemia?

Sickle cell anemia is inherited. It is passed from parents to their children through genes. A child must get a sickle cell gene from each parent to get the disease. If a child gets a gene for the disease from only one parent, that child will not get the disease. That child still carries the gene for the disease and can pass it on to any of his or her children.

### Who Gets Sickle Cell Anemia?

The people who most often get sickle cell anemia are:

- African Americans
- Arabs
- Greeks
- Italians
- Latinos
- People from India

### Tests for Sickle Cell Anemia

The doctor will order blood tests. The tests will show if the crisis is due to:

- Infection
- Anemia
- Sickle cells blocking the blood vessels

Genetic tests may also be done. Talk to your doctor about this.

### Warning Signs That a Crisis is about to Happen

Call your doctor right away if you have any of the signs listed below:

- Fever
- Shortness of breath
- Increased tiredness
- Swelling of the belly
- Bad headache
- Sudden weakness or loss of feeling
- Skin and whites of the eyes get a yellow color

### Treatment

- Medication for pain.
- You will be put on an IV. This will keep your body fluids up to normal.
- You may get a blood transfusion. That is, you will get a supply of new blood through your veins. This blood will have normal red cells. This is done if you have a low red cell count.
- Certain medicines can reduce the number of crises. Ask your doctor about these medicines.

### **Effects of Sickle Cell Anemia**

- Pain
- Stroke
- Increased risk of infection
- Leg sores that do not heal quickly
- Gallstones at a young age
- A child who does not grow as fast as normal
- Talk to your doctor about other effects that can happen

### **How to Prevent the Effects of Sickle Cell Anemia**

People who have sickle cell anemia need to be under the care of a doctor who understands this disease.

- Take a vitamin called folic acid daily. This helps make new red blood cells. Your doctor will tell you how much to take.
- Drink 8 to 10 glasses of water a day. Check with your doctor about this.
- Avoid very hot or very cold places.
- Avoid stress.
- Avoid hard physical exercise or work.
- Get plenty of sleep.
- Get regular checkups from doctors who understand this disease.

### **How can I find a Doctor?**

St. Vincent Charity Hospital has doctors who have special training in sickle cell disease. To contact one of our doctors, call the:

**Physician Referral Line** at 1-800-223-8662

Visit our Web site at [www.stvincentcharity.com](http://www.stvincentcharity.com)

Our doctors serve with a deep respect for all. Their goal is to give the best care and education whether or not a person can pay.

**St. Vincent Charity Hospital**

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