Understanding sickle cell anemia and sickle cell disease

Sickle cell disease is a group of blood disorders that cause red blood cells to change shape and die early. The disease is often found in people whose ancestors came from sub-Saharan Africa, South and Central America, Saudi Arabia, India, Mediterranean countries or the Caribbean. But, it can affect anyone, of any ethnic background. Almost 100,000 Americans suffer from sickle cell disease.

What is sickle cell disease?

Sickle cell disease makes the red blood cells become hard and sticky. They clog blood vessels and reduce blood flow, so less oxygen spreads through the body. This can cause pain, swelling, low energy and a bad mood.

People with sickle cell disease are more likely to suffer from:
- Illnesses caused by germs (also called infections)
- Eyesight loss
- Stroke
- Organ and tissue damage due to reduced blood flow

The life expectancy of someone with this disease is 30 years shorter than for those without it.

There are two different types of sickle cell disease (how much a person’s life is affected depends on the type he or she has):
- HbSS is one of the most common types, and is also the most severe. This is what's called “sickle cell anemia.”
- Sickle cell trait happens when a person inherits a sickle cell gene from one parent and a normal gene from the other. Usually people with sickle cell trait don’t suffer from the signs (also known as symptoms) of sickle cell disease, but they can pass it on to their children.

If I have sickle cell disease, what can I do to stay healthy?

If you have any form of sickle cell disease, it’s very important to drink plenty of water. Dehydration – a health problem where the body loses fluids – can bring on a pain crisis, where slow blood flow causes sudden chest, bone, or organ pain. The pain can last for hours or days, and can be mild or bad enough that you need to be treated in a hospital.

It’s also important to keep yourself from getting too hot or too cold and to avoid places with high altitude. The lower oxygen levels can cause a pain crisis. Exercising very hard also can cause your oxygen levels to drop, but as long as you rest when you’re tired and don’t do too much, you can live an active life.

Infections are a big problem for people with sickle cell disease. Avoid infections by getting all your shots. If you do get sick, see a doctor right away to keep the infection from getting worse and causing damage to your body that won't go away.
Have your eyes checked every year for damage to the retina (the inner layer of the eyeball). If a doctor catches it early on, you can have laser treatments done to stop any further damage.¹

Can I get sickle cell anemia or sickle cell disease from someone else?

Sickle cell disease is genetic, meaning people are born with it. You can’t catch it from someone else.¹ Babies who are born with sickle cell disease have to get the gene from both parents. Because a person can carry sickle cell trait without having any symptoms, there is a chance that two seemingly healthy people could have a baby with sickle cell disease. If either you or your partner are in a high-risk ethnic group, a simple blood test can show if you carry the sickle cell trait, and how likely you are to have a child with the disease.²

Can I give sickle cell disease to my child?⁴

Having sickle cell trait doesn’t mean your child will have sickle cell disease. Even if both parents have sickle cell trait, there is only a 25 percent chance their baby will have sickle cell disease. But, there is a 50 percent chance that the baby will have sickle cell trait.

Visit anthem.com for more ways to get healthy — and stay healthy.

Resources

The American Sickle Cell Anemia Association returns all calls within 24 hours. Call 216-229-8600 for facts and support. Or go to their website at ascaa.org and look under “Programs & Services” to find a list of support groups by state.

Connect with other people living with sickle cell disease at scinfo.org, the online Sickle Cell Information Center. You’ll also find tools to help teachers and employers learn about your health problem.