

# Risk of infection in Sickle Cell Disease

Information and advice for patients

## Sickle Cell and Thalassaemia

### What is Sickle Cell Disease?

Sickle Cell Disease is a genetic disorder where your red blood cells, which are normally round in shape, are mis-shapen like a sickle (crescent shape). This can lead to severely painful episodes known as crises as well as anaemia (low haemoglobin).

### Why is there a risk of infection in Sickle Cell Disease?

The spleen is a gland which forms part of the body's defence against some infections. It sits inside the left part of the abdomen (tummy) under the rib cage. It does not work effectively in patients with sickle cell disease.

If your spleen is not working fully, you will still be able to cope with most infections, but in some cases, serious infection may develop quickly. The risk of this happening is higher in children, but there is still a risk in adults.

### What infections am I more likely to get?

The most common infections that you could have are viral infections such as coughs and colds. However, some infections can be more serious and can result in bloodstream infections, pneumonia or meningitis.

### What can I do to minimise the risk of infections?

To reduce the risk of infections you can take antibiotics. For some patients, regular low doses of antibiotics are given to help prevent the onset of infections. If your doctor has recommended antibiotics, these must be taken every day. The usual recommended antibiotics are either Penicillin V 250mg taken twice a day, or if you are penicillin-allergic, Erythromycin 250mg taken twice a day.

Also make sure that you have a thermometer at home and that you know how to use it.

Check with your GP that your vaccines are up-to-date.

The following vaccines are recommended:

- Pneumococcal (every 5 years)
- Conjugated Meningococcal C Vaccine: A single dose should be given if you were not already given this as part of your childhood immunisations
- Haemophilus influenzae type b (Hib): A single dose should be given if you have not already received this as part of your childhood immunisations
- Influenza (flu) jab: This should be taken every year
- Other vaccines may be needed if you are travelling to high-risk areas. Before travelling, you should check with your GP.

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- If you are travelling to areas with malaria, then medicines to prevent malaria could be needed. Before travelling, you should check this with your GP.

### What are the warning signs of infection?

- Fever: If you feel hot you should always check your temperature. If you have a temperature above 38.0°C you should go to your nearest ED (Emergency Department) immediately.
- Low temperature: If you are unwell and your temperature is lower than 37.0°C you should seek medical advice from your GP.
- Rigors: violent shivering that you cannot control
- Severe sore throat
- Cough with discoloured phlegm
- Pain or a burning feeling when passing urine
- Sudden severe headache, neck stiffness or if your eyes hurt in or are sensitive to bright light

In the event of any of the above or if you feel unwell, seek immediate medical attention or advice as soon as possible.

Early diagnosis and treatment are essential and could be life-saving.

If you have any questions about any of the information in this leaflet, or there is anything that you do not understand please contact your doctor or nurse at the Sickle Cell and Thalassaemia Centre (SCAT). If you notice any signs of infection then during working hours contact your nurse/doctor at the Sickle Cell and Thalassaemia Centre. Out of hours or weekends visit your nearest ED (Emergency Department).

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### Contact details:

**Sickle Cell & Thalassaemia Centre**  
Sandwell & West Birmingham NHS Trust  
City Hospital  
Dudley Road  
Birmingham  
B18 7QH  
Tel: 0121 507 6040

### Opening hours

Monday, 9am – 4pm  
Tuesday, 9am – 6pm  
Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, 9am – 5pm  
Saturday blood transfusion service only

The information in this leaflet is general and is intended to be a guide only. Please discuss the specific details of your treatment with your GP.

### Further information for patients:

**Sickle Cell Society**  
54 Station Road,  
London  
NW10 4UA  
Tel.: 020 8961 7795  
Email: [info@sicklecellsociety.org](mailto:info@sicklecellsociety.org)  
[www.sicklecellsociety.org](http://www.sicklecellsociety.org)

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### Source used for the information in this leaflet:

- Sickle Cell Society (2018) Standards for the clinical care of adults with sickle cell disease in the UK. Available at: <https://www.sicklecellsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Standards-for-the-Clinical-Care-of-Adults-with-Sickle-Cell-in-the-UK-2018.pdf> (Accessed: 12 August 2020).
- National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2012). Sickle cell disease: managing acute painful episodes in hospital. Clinical guideline [CG143]. Available at: <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg143> (Accessed: 12 August 2020).

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ML6225

Issue Date: October 2020  
Review Date: October 2023