

Priapism

Information and advice for patients

Sickle Cell and Thalassaemia Centre

What is priapism?

Priapism is an unwanted, prolonged and painful erection. It occurs without stimulation, sexual desire or arousal. It is a complication of sickle cell disease and is a form of sickle cell crisis. Priapism is thought to affect as many as 50% of men with sickle cell disease.

What causes priapism?

Priapism is caused by the blood vessels in the penis becoming blocked by sickle cells, preventing the blood from flowing. It is often triggered by the same factors that cause other types of sickle cell crisis including stress, infection, low oxygen levels, dehydration, physical activity, and hot and cold environments. Alcohol and smoking can act as triggers for all types of sickle cell crisis including priapism. Sometimes the reason is not clear.

An early morning erection is normal and usually resolves on passing urine. Occasionally, in people with sickle cell disease, an early morning erection can develop into a priapism episode, particularly if it doesn't resolve on passing urine.

What are the symptoms of priapism?

There are 2 types of priapism:

- **Stuttering priapism** - Short attacks of painful erections that resolve without treatment. It is called 'stuttering' because the erection does not last long but keeps recurring. They usually happen at night. Some episodes of stuttering priapism are not painful, but the longer it goes on for, the more painful the erections become. Stuttering priapism may develop into a more severe attack of acute (fulminant) priapism.
- **Fulminant priapism** - A major episode of a painful erection which can last for several hours; this is an emergency that requires urgent medical attention as it will often not get better without medical help. It needs emergency medical attention. Call 999 or go to the emergency department (A&E or ED) if the erection lasts more than 1 hour.

Priapism can be very frightening and embarrassing for some people, but it is important to seek help and not suffer in silence because the longer it lasts, the greater the risk of long-term damage.

How is priapism diagnosed?

A doctor will diagnose priapism by your symptoms. Your haemoglobinopathy team understand it can be difficult to talk about so can help you raise the issue.

How is priapism treated?

When priapism first starts there are several things you can do to manage it at home:

- Try to empty your bladder
- Drink lots of fluid
- Take painkillers
- Some people also find that having warm baths or showers can help
- Gentle exercise such as walking up and down the stairs can also assist
- Do not apply ice or cold water to the penis as this can make the priapism worse.

Some people also find that having warm baths or using ice packs can help to overcome the episode.

If the episode of priapism does not settle in 1 hour please go to your nearest ED (emergency department) or the SCAT centre as soon as possible as you may need emergency treatment.

Treating an Acute Fulminant Priapism

In hospital you will be given painkillers and fluids either by mouth or through a drip. If this does not resolve the priapism, a Urologist may try to drain some of the blood from your penis and remove the trapped red blood cells with a tiny needle and syringe. Occasionally some people may also be given injections into their penis at the same time, to squeeze the blood vessels to help the blood flow through.

What are the benefits of this treatment?

The benefit of draining the blood is that this can quickly resolve priapism.

What are the risks of this treatment?

If you do not have treatment for priapism, you could have long-term damage to your penis. This could result in impotence (being unable to get an erection).

It is important to understand that the urologist is trying to prevent more severe and lasting damage for you.

Are there any alternatives to this treatment?

An alternative to this treatment is to have a small shunt inserted into the penis during an operation to drain the blood away. This treatment is only used as a last resort and the surgeon will give you more information about it if it is needed.

What are the risks of not getting treatment?

If you do not have treatment for priapism you could have long-term damage to your penis. This could result in impotence (being unable to get an erection).

Can priapism be prevented?

There are things you can do to reduce your chances of having an episode of priapism:

- Exercise regularly
- Avoid late nights
- Get enough sleep
- Avoid drinking excessive amounts of alcohol
- Avoid smoking
- Drink plenty of fluids, three litres per day.

There are also medications available that can reduce your risk of having an episode of priapism; your consultant will discuss these with you if they are appropriate.

Contact details

If you have any questions or concerns please contact the Sickie Cell and Thalassaemia Centre.

Sickle cell and Thalassaemia Centre

C3, 3rd Floor
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Grove Lane
Smethwick
B66 2QT

Telephone: 0121 507 6040

Opening Hours

Monday, 9am – 5pm

Tuesday, 9am – 6pm

Wednesday, 9am – 5pm

Thursday, 9am – 5pm

Friday, 9am – 4pm

Saturday blood transfusion service only

Further information

For more information about our hospitals and services please see our website:

Sandwell and West Birmingham NHS Trust
www.swbh.nhs.uk

Sources of information

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: 31 May 2023).

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