Sickle cell disease

Normal blood cells contain hemoglobin, an iron-rich protein. The cells are disc-shaped and easily carry oxygen through the blood vessels.

Sickle cells contain an abnormal hemoglobin that changes the shape of the blood cells into crescent moons. (The disease is named for this sickle-like, crescent shape.) This shape keeps the sickle cells from flowing smoothly through the blood vessels. These cells are also stiff and sticky, and sometimes they get stuck and block blood flow, causing pain and sometimes damaging organs, muscles and bones.

Sickle cell disease is most common in those whose families come from Africa, South or Central America (especially Panama), Caribbean islands, Mediterranean countries (such as Turkey, Greece and Italy), India and Saudi Arabia. The disease occurs in 1 out of 500 African-American births, and it affects 70,000 to 100,000 people in the United States, mostly African-Americans.

This is a life-long, inherited disease. Those who have it are born with it; they inherited two genes for sickle hemoglobin, one from each parent. When a child inherits the gene from just one parent, that child has sickle cell trait not sickle cell disease but can pass the sickle hemoglobin gene on to their children who may or may not get the disease.

Over the past 100 years, doctors have learned a great deal about this disease. With proper care and treatment, many people who have sickle cell disease can have improved quality of life and reasonable health much of the time.

September Is National Sickle Cell Disease Awareness Month

Prayer: Loving God, I pray for those with sickle cell disease. Comfort them in their times of pain. Bless those who strive to discover new ways to treat and prevent this condition. Amen.

Living with sickle cell disease

The impact of sickle cell disease varies greatly from person to person. While some have chronic (long-term) pain, those with milder pain can often treat it at home by following simple and natural steps that are often effective:

✦ Stay well hydrated. Drink lots of water (and other liquids).
✦ Get plenty of rest.
✦ Stay away from cigarette smoke.

Those with sickle cell disease need to be aware of what triggers pain for them. Here are some possibilities:

✦ Too much exercise. Stop at the first sign of being tired.
✦ Cold temperatures and high winds. Avoid both if possible.
  · Carry a sweater and pair of socks when attending movies or restaurants, so you are prepared if you feel chilled.

Parents of a child with sickle cell disease have extra work. Being certain all immunizations are current and scheduling regular checkups are critical, of course. While the child can participate in normal school activities, parents need to tell teachers about the repercussions of the disease – possibly more frequent bathroom trips and the need for liquids.

Finding a support group can be a big benefit. You form friendships with others with similar needs, your sense of hope grows and you know you are not alone with this disease.

Stress often accompanies sickle cell disease, too, but you can learn ways to help you relax. Prayer, meditation, visualization or guided imagery, deep breathing and self-talk are methods to try. Notice what works for you. And turn to your faith leader and faith community for support.

- advocatehealth.com
- ascaa.org – American Sickle Cell Association
- sicklecellsupportgroup.org
- sicklecelldisease-Illinois.org
- sicklecellawareness.org/news_and_events