

Sickle Cell Disease – Pain Crisis

Pain is one of the most common and distressing symptoms that affects sickle cell patients. The more you know about the causes, prevention, and treatment of pain, the better your chances for an early recovery.

Preventing a Pain Crisis

A pain crisis can happen any time, but is more likely to happen when there is extra stress on the body. These stressors can include illness, overexertion, exhaustion, extremes in temperature (being very hot or very cold), and dehydration. Pain crises can't always be prevented, but you can reduce the number you experience with proper self-care techniques.

Here are some ways to reduce your chances of having a pain crisis:

- Dress appropriately when heading outdoors to exercise, play or work. This way you avoid getting too warm or too cold.
- Drink plenty of healthy fluids and always carry a water bottle with you.
- Get plenty of sleep. Listen to your body and rest when you feel you need to.
- Avoid cold swimming pools and very warm hot tubs.
- Reduce stress and learn effective coping techniques to manage stress.
- Exercise regularly but avoid excessive strenuous activities such as competitive sport training.
- Do not smoke, and avoid exposure to second hand smoke. Both active and passive smoking may trigger acute chest syndrome in sickle cell patients.
- Avoid situations with low oxygen, such as flying in an unpressurized airline.
- See your health care provider immediately if you have a fever.

Treating a Pain Crisis

Despite your best efforts at prevention, you will likely still experience some pain crises. A pain crisis can come on very suddenly, range from mild to severe, and can last for days to weeks.

To reduce your need for hospitalization, it is important to start treatment at home as soon as you notice the pain coming on. Home treatment consists of three steps:

1. DRINK EXTRA FLUIDS
 - Water, juice and rehydrating drinks such as Gatorade are your best options
 - Avoid drinks with caffeine (pop, coffee and black tea)

2. TAKE PAIN MEDICATION

- Over the counter pain relievers such as acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil) as prescribed on bottle
- If your doctor has prescribed morphine you may take Tylenol or Advil as well to maximize its effect

3. REST

In addition, you may want to take a warm bath, use a warming pad on the affected area, or enlist the help of distractions such as music, TV or meditation.

It is always a good idea to keep track of your pain in a journal. A pain journal can give your health care provider important information that will help in treating the pain and preventing further crises. The acronym **LOCATES** indicates what information should be included:

L: Location – where on your body is the pain?

O: Other Symptoms – are there any other symptoms? (fever, nausea, cough, etc.)

C: Character – What is the pain like? Burning, deep, sharp, throbbing?

A: Alleviating and Aggravating measures – what makes the pain better or worse?

T: Timing – when did it start? Does it come and go?

E: Environment – where were you and what were you doing when the pain started?

S: Severity – How does your pain rate on a scale 0-10?

If your pain does not get better on home treatment, or if there are other worrisome signs present such as fever, weakness, or chest or abdominal pain, seek health care immediately. In general, the sooner a pain crisis is tackled, the better the chances of a quicker recovery.

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