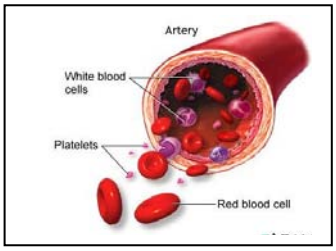
Well Child™



Sickle cell anemia

Sickle cell anemia is a disease passed down through families in which red blood cells form an abnormal crescent shape. (Red blood cells are normally shaped like a disc.)

Causes, incidence, and risk factors

The fragile, sickle-shaped cells deliver less oxygen to the body's tissues. They can also get stuck more easily in small blood vessels, and break into pieces that interrupt healthy blood flow.

Sickle cell anemia is inherited from both parents. If you inherit the hemoglobin S gene from one parent and normal hemoglobin (A) from your other parent, you will have sickle cell trait. People with sickle cell trait do not have the symptoms of sickle cell anemia.

Sickle cell disease is much more common in people of African and Mediterranean descent. It is also seen in people from South and Central America, the Caribbean, and the Middle East.

Symptoms

Almost all patients with sickle cell anemia have painful episodes (called crises), which can last from hours to days. These crises can affect the bones of the back, the long bones, and the chest.

Some patients have one episode every few years. Others have many episodes per year. The crises can be severe enough to require a hospital stay.

Common symptoms include:

- Attacks of abdominal pain
- Bone pain
- Breathlessness
- Fatigue
- Fever
- Chest pain
- Excessive thirst
- Frequent urination
- Skin ulcers

Call your health care provider if you have:

- Painful crises
- Any symptoms of infection (fever, body aches, headache, fatigue)

Prevention

If you have sickle cell anemia, you can prevent the change in red blood cell shape by:

- Getting enough fluids
- Getting enough oxygen
- Quickly treating infections

Consider having the child with sickle cell anemia wear a Medic Alert bracelet.

Preventing Crisis

It is important to maintain good oxygen levels and to prevent dehydration. The following steps can help prevent a sickle cell crisis:

- Avoid strenuous activities, stress, smoking, high-altitudes, non-pressurized flights, and other events that reduce your oxygen level
- Always have plenty of fluids with you
- Avoid too much sun exposure