

# Sickle Cell Disease: Fever and Infection

Patient and Family Education

This teaching sheet contains general information only. Your child's doctor or a member of your child's health care team will talk with you about specific care for your child.

#### What is a fever?

- A fever for children with sickle cell disease is when the body temperature is 101°F (38.3 C) or higher. It is measured by using a thermometer.
- A fever is often the first sign of an infection. **Infections must be treated quickly.**

#### What is an infection?

An infection is when germs (bacteria or virus) grow or travel to any part of the body. Infections are a big danger to children with sickle cell disease. Children with sickle cell disease:

- Have a higher chance of getting infections than those who do not have sickle cell disease.
- Can have any infection at any time during their life.
- Can die from infections caused by bacteria if they are not treated in time.

# What type of infection could my child have?

Your child can have an infection in the:

- Lungs (pneumonia)
- Blood (bacteremia or sepsis)
- Bowel (gastroenteritis)
- Bladder or kidneys (urinary tract infection or pyelonephritis)
- Bone (osteomyelitis)
- Brain (meningitis)
- Ear and throat

# Why is my child at higher risk for an infection?

- The spleen is one of the organs in the body that helps to fight infection. In sickle cell disease, the spleen does not work as it should. This is due to damage from the sickle red blood cells.
- When damage to the spleen occurs, it cannot fight off infections well.
- Damage to the spleen starts when a child is less than 1 year old.
- Children with HbSS and HbS beta zero thalssemia have much lower spleen function.

# Sickle Cell Anemia: Fever and Infection, Continued

# What should I do if my child has a fever?

- Take your child's temperature anytime he acts or looks ill.
  - Have a thermometer at home and know how to use it.
  - Make sure that others taking care of your child know how to use it too.
- If your child has a fever of 101°F or 38.3 C higher, call your child's health care provider **right away**.
- Fever is a medical emergency. Do not wait until the next day to call the clinic or your primary care doctor. Call the on-call doctor if needed.
- Be ready to bring your child to the emergency room or clinic.
- If your child has a fever, do **NOT** give him Tylenol, Motrin, Advil or other medicines that contains acetaminophen or ibuprofen.
  - These medicines can bring the fever down, but they do NOT treat the cause of the fever.
  - **Always** check your child's temperature before giving him pain medicine.



If your child has a fever, he may also have one or more of these:

- Cough
- Chills
- Cold symptoms like a stuffy or runny nose
- Body aches

- Not wanting to eat or play
- Feeling weak or tired
- Headache
- Vomiting or diarrhea

#### How is a fever treated?

Fever is usually a sign of infection. Infections caused by bacteria can be very serious. **Getting treatment for your child right away can help to save his life.** 

If your child has a fever, have him seen by a doctor **right away**. Your child will need:

- A complete physical exam
- Lab tests to check his blood count and find out if he has any germs (a culture)
- Other tests depend on your child's symptoms. These tests may include a chest X-ray and a urine test.

# What happens if my child is admitted to the hospital?

Your child may be admitted to the hospital for more care. Children less than 12 months old with fever are usually admitted for at least 1 day. If your child's tests show that he has an infection, he will stay longer. In the hospital, your child may need:

- Strong antibiotics given through a vein (IV) or into the muscle (a shot) to help fight the infection
- IV fluids
- Medicines to treat his fever
- Vital signs (temperature, pulse and blood pressure) and oxygen level checks

In case of an urgent concern or emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department right away.

# Sickle Cell Anemia: Fever and Infection, Continued

- A physical exam each day
- Blood tests
- Your child can go home when he is feeling better, has no fever and the lab work shows no signs of an infection.

# What happens when my child goes home?

Make sure you understand and follow all of your child's discharge instructions.

- Bring him to the clinic for follow-up as his health care provider directs.
- If your child is still taking antibiotics, give them for the full time prescribed, even if he feels better.
- Ask your child's health care provider about using acetaminophen (Tylenol or other less costly store brand) or ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil or other less costly store brand) for fever. **DO NOT:** 
  - Give your child more than 5 doses of acetaminophen in a 24-hour period.
  - Give acetaminophen to babies less than 3 months of age without a doctor's order.
  - Give ibuprofen to babies less than 6 months of age without a doctor's order.

# How can I help prevent a fever and infections?

To help prevent infection, follow these guidelines:

- Your child's doctor may order an antibiotic to help prevent infections caused by bacteria (germs).
  - It does **not** prevent all infections.
  - Give it as your child's doctor directs. This is very important.
- Immunize (vaccinate) your child to help protect his body from harmful germs. Keep your child's vaccines up-to-date. Your child will also need other vaccines as advised by his sickle cell provider.
- Clean your hands often. Wash them well with soap and water for 15 seconds or use an alcohol-based cleaner. Teach your child and anyone who cares for him to wash their hands often too.

# What should I do if my child is sick?

- Follow your child's doctor's advice for what you should do.
- Call your child's health care provider anytime that your child has a fever of 101°F or higher and is sick. Your child will need to be seen **right away.**
- During the time when the clinic is closed (between 5PM and 8AM during the week, on weekends and holidays), call the hematologist on call. They will notify the Emergency Room and help with your child's care.
- **ALWAYS** tell the Emergency Room doctors and staff that your child has sickle cell disease. Also tell them which sickle cell clinic he visits.

For more information on sickle cell disease and services, visit Children's Healthcare of Atlanta website at www.choa.org/sicklecell.

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