

Vaccinations, antibiotics and travel advice: Information for adult patients with sickle cell disease

This leaflet provides information and advice on vaccinations, antibiotics and travel for patients with sickle cell disease. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to speak with your sickle cell doctors or specialist nurses.

Why do I need vaccinations or antibiotics?

The spleen is a small organ on the left side of your tummy. It forms part of your immune system and produces cells that protect you from infections. In the majority of patients with sickle cell disease (SCD), the spleen stops functioning altogether during childhood. When this happens, it increases your risk of becoming seriously unwell if infected with certain types of bacteria, and may even lead to serious infections, such as meningitis and pneumonia. You will also be more prone to developing severe illness from viruses, such as influenza (flu).

For these reasons, it is strongly recommended that all patients with SCD receive certain vaccinations, as these help to protect you from infections. Life-long preventative antibiotics are also recommended in some people.

Which vaccinations should I have?

It is recommended that all patients with SCD have the following vaccines (in addition to those recommended as part of routine vaccination programmes in the UK):

- **Pneumococcal vaccine:** You should have this every five years. Your immunity will be checked in the sickle cell clinic when you come for annual review, and a booster dose may be administered if your body has not formed immunity.
- **Seasonal flu vaccine:** You are advised to get this every year from your GP.
- **Hepatitis B vaccine:** This is advised for all patients who are likely to ever require transfusion. If you are on regular transfusion, this will be given in the day unit or clinic. Otherwise it should be arranged with your GP. As with all vaccinations, your immunity will be checked in the sickle cell clinic during your annual review, and a booster dose may be administered if required. Your doctor will advise you on this.

You may be advised to have other vaccines, such as **meningococcal C** or **Haemophilus influenzae type B** if you have not had them before. Your doctor will give you further information about these if required.

Your haematologist will do the blood test during your clinic visit and advise on which vaccinations are due, but it does help if you can also keep your own record of when you last had them.

Which antibiotics should I have?

It is recommended that you take regular antibiotics to help prevent infection if:

- you are over 50 years of age
- you have not responded adequately to the pneumococcal vaccine
- you have not had the pneumococcal vaccine
- you have had previous pneumococcus infections.

The first choice antibiotic is penicillin V 250mg twice daily. You may, however, be prescribed an alternative (usually erythromycin 250mg twice daily) if you are allergic to penicillin or to antibiotics similar to penicillin. Please make sure you let your doctor know if you have any allergies to any medicines.

In order for preventative antibiotics to be effective, it is recommended that you take them every day. Some patients forget or decide only to take the antibiotics when they are ill, which is not advisable. Please ensure that you do not run out – always arrange to get a fresh supply from your doctor before you run out completely.

If you are struggling to take your antibiotics every day, please follow the tips below:

- 1) Speak to a member of the SCD team about why you are finding it difficult to remember to take your antibiotics. They may be able to offer you important advice.
- 2) Put a reminder on your mobile phone to bleep when you are due to take your antibiotics.
- 3) Make taking your antibiotics part of your daily routine. To help you to remember to take your medication every day, you could put the antibiotics next to your toothbrush or in a visible place near your bed so that you see them when going about your daily tasks.

Travel advice

Vaccinations and medicines

Different parts of the world have different infection risks. If you are travelling abroad, you should speak to your GP or a registered travel clinic to ensure that you get the most appropriate vaccinations for your area of travel. Please ensure that you plan ahead and allow enough time for you to have all the medicines you need before travelling.

Contrary to some people's beliefs, having SCD **does not** protect you from malaria. It is therefore important to take anti-malarial tablets, use insect repellents, wear protective clothing and use mosquito nets. Any insect bites should be kept clean and any signs of infection should be treated immediately, as wounds (especially on the legs) can quickly develop into ulcers which can be difficult to treat.

Flying

Flying sometimes causes some people to have sickle cell crises because of changes in oxygen pressure levels when flying at high altitudes. It is important to keep warm, drink extra fluids, move around the plane during the flight and avoid drinking alcohol. If you are well and are in a pressurised cabin, you will not need extra oxygen unless:

- you have been diagnosed with chest problems and are already on home oxygen
- your doctor has recommended the use of oxygen.

If you do need extra oxygen, you should contact the airline you are travelling with to arrange this. Some airlines may charge for this service. If you fall sick and are not able to fly or travel, please contact your airline as soon as possible.

Health insurance

Before travelling it is essential that you consider taking out travel insurance. If you are travelling to Europe (EEC member states), you can also apply online for a **European Health Insurance Card** (EHIC). The EHIC is not an alternative to travel insurance but will cover the cost of treatment for pre-existing medical conditions, such as SCD. If you are travelling to a non-EEC country, it is important that you take out health insurance with a company that covers patients with long-term conditions. You must declare your SCD or your insurance may be invalid and you will be liable for the cost of your medical treatment.

Planning to travel

You should discuss your plans with a member of the sickle cell team before you travel as they will be able to offer you important information on how to travel safely. We sometimes recommend that you take a medical letter or your care plan with you on your trip, as this can help explain your sickle cell disease, how it can be managed and who to contact if you become unwell. Always remember to take a supply of your regular medicines with you, including painkillers in case you develop a crisis. If you are taking strong opioids, such as morphine or oxycodone for pain relief, it may be advisable that you have a letter from your doctor explaining why it is important that you travel with these medicines.

Important note

If you develop high fever, you should contact your GP or sickle cell team, or seek urgent medical advice if you are abroad, as you may have an infection.

Useful contacts

Role	Name	Contact details
Consultant haematologist	Dr Jo Howard	t: 020 7188 2741 (secretary)
Consultant haematologist	Dr Rachael Kesse-Adu	t: 020 7188 2741 (secretary)
Advanced nurse practitioner	Mr Neil Westerdale	t: 020 7188 2710 Bleep: 1843 Mob: 07770 683947
Advanced nurse practitioner – adolescents transition	Mr Luhanga Musumadi	t: 020 7188 2710 Bleep: 2256 Mob: 07770 678851
Clinical nurse specialist	Mrs Judith St Hilaire	t: 020 7188 2710 Bleep: 2868 Mob: 07920 711266
Consultant health psychologist	Dr Nicky Thomas	t: 020 7188 2725
Consultant clinical/health psychologist	Dr Heather Rawle	t: 020 7188 2718
Health psychologist	Ms Mina Abedian	t: 020 7188 2718
Haematology clinic		t: 020 7188 2743/2724
Haematology day unit		t: 020 7188 2745 / 2710

Pharmacy Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

t: 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

To make comments or raise concerns about the Trust's services, please contact PALS. Ask a member of staff to direct you to the PALS office or:

t: 020 7188 8801 at St Thomas'

t: 020 7188 8803 at Guy's

e: pals@gstt.nhs.uk

Language Support Services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch using the following contact details.

t: 020 7188 8815 **fax:** 020 7188 5953

NHS 111

Offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day.

t: 111

NHS Choices

Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health.

w: www.nhs.uk

Become a member of your local hospitals, and help shape our future

Membership is free and it is completely up to you how much you get involved. To become a member of our Foundation Trust, you need to be 18 years of age or over, live in Lambeth, Southwark, Lewisham, Wandsworth or Westminster or have been a patient at either hospital in the last five years. To join:

t: 0848 143 4017

e: members@gstt.nhs.uk

w: www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk