Sickle cell anemia:
A brighter outlook

Sickle cell anemia is a serious illness that affects how the blood carries oxygen through the body. It’s most common in African Americans, but also disproportionately affects those with ethnic backgrounds from Mediterranean countries, East India or Middle Eastern countries. The National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI) reports that one out of every 500 African-American babies is born with this disease.

There’s no cure for sickle cell anemia. Even so, treatments are greatly improved. People with this health condition now live longer, healthier lives than in the past.

What causes it?
People get sickle cell anemia if they inherit two genes for this condition — one from each parent. Sickle cell anemia is present at birth, but many infants don’t show any signs until after four months of age. This condition changes the shape of red blood cells, which transport oxygen.

These cells are normally disc-shaped and slide easily through blood vessels. With sickle cell anemia, red blood cells are shaped more like sickles or crescents. These sickle cells are stiff and sticky. This kind of cell tends to block blood flow. Sickle cells also die quickly, resulting in fewer red blood cells to carry oxygen.

What can happen?
Some people with sickle cell anemia have only mild symptoms. However, others often need to be hospitalized for treatment. According to the NHLBI, sickle cell anemia can cause:

- Fatigue, which may be caused by low oxygen levels in the blood
- Chronic pain — especially in the bones. Pain can last for months.
- Sudden pain throughout the body. This is called sickle cell crisis.
- Damage to the bones, kidneys, heart and other organs
- Serious infections
- Stroke

Family ties
About 1 in 12 African Americans carry one gene for sickle cell anemia. This is called sickle cell trait. These people don’t get sickle cell anemia, but they can pass the gene on to their children.

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How is it treated?
Sickle cell anemia can be diagnosed with a simple blood test. All states now mandate the testing of newborns for sickle cell disease as part of their newborn screening programs.

Some people with this condition need regular blood transfusions. However, a medicine for adults called hydroxyurea can reduce that need. This medicine also helps many people have fewer pain crises and hospitalizations.

Children with sickle cell anemia often need to take antibiotics to prevent infections. They should be seen by a doctor at the first sign of a fever.

The NHLBI lists these additional strategies for living well with sickle cell anemia:

- For pain, try a heating pad or over-the-counter medicines. Prescription pain medicine may be needed for more severe pain.
- Drink plenty of fluids. This can help reduce the risk of a painful crisis.
- Get a flu shot every year.
- Get vaccinated against pneumonia.

Keep in mind that having sickle cell anemia raises the risk for stroke. Be sure that you know the signs of stroke. Get help right away if you think you may be having one. Children also can have strokes, so watch them for these signs too.

These treatments and preventive health steps have greatly improved life expectancy in people with sickle cell anemia. In fact, death rates among African-American children have fallen dramatically. And researchers are looking for more and better treatments for this condition.

Drink up
When the body is dehydrated, the risk for a painful sickle cell crisis can go up. So, it’s essential to drink plenty of fluids – at least 8 glasses of water a day.