

Antibiotics, vaccinations and travel advice for your child with sickle cell disease

Why does my child need antibiotics or vaccination?

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

For these reasons, it is strongly recommended that all children with SCD take regular antibiotics and receive certain vaccinations, to help protect them from infections.

Spleen

The spleen helps to clear infection from the body and also clears up old or damaged blood cells. You will be shown how to feel your child's spleen when they are well, so that you can tell if it is getting bigger and might need medical attention.

Which antibiotics should my child have?

We strongly recommended that your child receives regular antibiotics to help prevent infection. This will usually be penicillin, but your doctor will be able to prescribe an alternative (usually erythromycin) if your child is allergic to penicillin.

The doses of penicillin are:

Up to one year of age	62.5 mg twice daily
One to four years	125 mg twice daily
Five years and over	250 mg twice daily

Which vaccinations should my child have?

It is important that your child's vaccinations are up to date. As well as the **routine childhood vaccinations**, your child will need some additional vaccinations.

- **Hepatitis B vaccination** (from one year of age). If not vaccinated as part of the routine childhood vaccination programme.
- **Pneumococcal vaccination** (pneumovax) (from two years and then every five years).
- **Annual flu vaccination** (from six months).
- **Consider annual COVID-19 vaccination** (from 5yrs)

You may be advised that your child should have other vaccines, such as **Meningococcal C (MenC) or Haemophilus influenzae type B (Hib)**. Your doctor will give you further information about these if required.

Travel advice

Different parts of the world have different infection risks. If travelling abroad, you should speak to your GP or a registered travel clinic to ensure that your child gets the appropriate vaccinations and anti-malarial medicines for their destination of travel.

Travel vaccination

If your child is travelling to an area of high risk of infection, additional vaccination may be required. Your GP or travel clinic will give you further information about these if required.

Malaria

Patients with SCD are at risk of malaria, even if they have previously lived in a malarial area. Therefore, when travelling to an area affected by malaria, it is important your child wears protective clothing, uses insect repellents and mosquito nets, and takes anti-malarial tablets. Your GP or travel clinic will be able to give you information on the recommended anti-malarial medicines. Your child will need to start these medicines before they travel, to make sure that they can tolerate them.

Diarrhoea

Diarrhoea is common among travellers abroad. For sickle cell patients this can cause dehydration which can trigger a crisis. To prevent this, it is advisable to carry a supply of oral rehydration sachets, eg Dioralyte[®], which can be purchased from your local pharmacy.

If your child has G6PD deficiency, you should be aware that some medicines may cause problems so please ensure that you inform your child's doctor of their G6PD status.

Remember to plan ahead and allow enough time for your child to have all the vaccinations/medicines they need before travelling.

Flying

Flying sometimes causes sickle cell crisis because of the changes in oxygen pressure at high altitudes. Aircraft can be cold inside and travelling can be stressful. Ensure you dress your child in **warm clothes**. Encourage them to drink extra fluid before and during the flight and to walk around during the flight.

Remember to keep your child well hydrated when you are travelling to hot climates. Children with SCD pass urine more frequently causing dehydration that can trigger painful crises.

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 for a The UK Global Health Insurance Card (GHIC). The GHIC 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-European country, it is important that you take out health insurance with a company that covers patients with long-term conditions.

You must declare your child's SCD or your insurance may be invalid and you will be liable for the cost of your child's medical treatment.

The **Sickle Cell Society** may be able to provide you with a list of amenable insurers.

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 important information on how to travel safely. We recommend that you take a medical letter with you on your trip, to explain your child's sickle cell disease and current medications. Always remember to take a supply of your child's regular medications with you, including painkillers, in case your child develops a crisis.

Contact us

Lead consultant for haemoglobin disorders, and consultant in haematology, phone: 020 7188 6203 (secretary), **email:** Dudhma.Banu@gstt.nhs.uk

Lead nurse, phone: 020 7188 9432 or 07918 338730
email: HaemoglobinopathyCNS@gstt.nhs.uk

Nurse specialist, phone: 07771 345847 or 07517 592436 **email:** HaemoglobinopathyCNS@gstt.nhs.uk

Research nurse, phone: 020 7188 6637 or 07517 592436

Specialist nurse – community, phone: 020 3049 5993 or 07880 781545

Therapy and psychology team, phone: 020 7188 9125 or 07817 905844

Help and advice will always be available if you have any questions or concerns. Out of hours, please call the hospital switchboard, **phone:** 020 7188 7188 and ask them to bleep the haematology registrar.

If you need to come to emergency department (A&E) at St Thomas' Hospital, please telephone the department before you arrive, **phone:** 020 7188 2111 and let them know about your child's condition. This will help to improve your child's care when you arrive.

Further information

Sickle Cell and Thalassaemia Conference

This annual international conference is held at Guy's and St Thomas', with world experts in haemoglobinopathies. For more information visit the websites below. If you are interested in attending, please email Dr Baba Inusa.

website: www.scorecharity.com

website: www.ststn.co.uk

email: baba.inusa@gstt.nhs.uk

Sickle Cell Society

Provides help and support for people affected by sickle cell disorders and their carers.

phone: 0800 001 5660

website: www.sicklecellsociety.org

The Sickle Cell & Thalassaemia Centre

Provides information about sickle cell disease.

Thalassaemia counsellors can also offer support and information. The centre can also direct you to local services.

phone: 020 7414 1363

Evelina London Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your child's medicines, please speak to the staff caring for them or contact our helpline.

phone: 020 7188 3003, Monday to Friday, 10am to 5pm

email: letstalkmedicines@gstt.nhs.uk

Leaflet number: 4082/VER4

Date published: October 2023

Review date: October 2026

© 2023 Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust

A list of sources is available on request