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The Royal Liverpool
and Broadgreen
University Hospitals
NHS Trust

Patient information

Haemaglobinopathy Disorders - Vaccinations Antibiotics and Travel Advice For Adult Patients With Sickle Cell Disease

Haematology Department

Introduction

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 nurse.

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 family doctor (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.

Which antibiotics should I have?

It is recommended that you take regular antibiotics to help prevent infection due to your spleen not functioning

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 beep 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 family doctor (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.

If you have any questions relating to any of the information contained in this leaflet please don't hesitate to speak to one of your medical/nursing team.

Haemoglobinopathy / Sickle Cell Team:

Dr D Simcox	Consultant Haematologist
Prof CH Toh	Consultant Haematologist
Dr V J Martlew	Consultant Haematologist
Dr T Dutt	Consultant Haematologist
Haematology Specialist Registrar (Rotational Position)	
Francesca Murphy	Clinical Nurse Specialist

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Following your discharge from hospital or attendance at your outpatient appointment you will receive a text asking if you would recommend our service to others. Please take the time to text back, you will not be charged for the text and can opt out at any point. Your co-operation is greatly appreciated.

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