Sickle Cell Pain Crisis

What is a sickle cell pain crisis?
A sickle cell crisis is pain that can begin suddenly and last several hours to several days. It happens when abnormal, sickle-shaped red blood cells block small blood vessels that carry blood to your bones and organs. You might have pain in your back, knees, legs, arms, chest or stomach. The pain can be throbbing, sharp, dull or stabbing. How often and how bad the pain gets varies a lot from person to person and from crisis to crisis. Areas affected can be swollen and warm. A small child may not be able to tell you that they have pain but may act fretful and fussy or they may protect areas of their body that hurt. They may also have swollen fingers, hands, toes or feet as part of their sickle crisis.

What causes a sickle crisis?
Most of the time you won’t know what caused your sickle cell crisis. A crisis usually has more than one cause. You can do several things to keep a crisis from occurring:

- Exercise regularly but not so much that you become really tired. When you exercise, drink lots of fluids.
- Drink plenty of fluids, especially during warm weather
- Treat any infections as soon as they occur
- Wear warm clothes outside in cold weather and inside in air-conditioned rooms during hot weather. Also, don’t swim in cold water.

How is it treated?
If your pain is moderate or severe, the emergency physician may prescribe you a narcotic such as codeine. Take this only as directed. Some over-the-counter medicine might help relieve pain as well. Taking ibuprofen (Advil or Motrin) along with the narcotic often helps. Make sure you talk to your doctor before taking any medicine for your pain. It is important to treat sickle cell pain as soon as you notice that the pain has started.

What else can I do to control the pain?
If you are an older child or teenager, a warm bath, massage or rest may help your pain. Try to have a positive attitude. Develop activities or hobbies that may keep you from thinking about your pain. You need a supportive environment through strong family relationships and close personal friends to help you through your pain. Talk to your doctor to help set goals for the management of your pain.

What to watch for
Call your doctor or return to the emergency department for any of the following:

- Pain is not controlled with the prescribed medicines.
- Fever, difficulty breathing or chest pain.
- Weakness, loss of movement, behavior change, or severe or worsening headache.
- Abdominal pain not improving with prescribed medications.
- Symptoms getting worse or any other concerns.