

Sickle Cell in Winter

How do I stay well?



Croydon
Sickle Cell & Thalassaemia
Support Group

Getting cold can make Sickle cell worse. Here are some tips to follow to help you stay well, despite the weather and so not miss school, work or fun!

So what is going on in Sickle cell disease?

Sickle cell is a genetic disorder affecting the red blood cells. Red cells are usually soft and flexible and can squeeze through tiny blood vessels. The red cells need to do this as part of their vital job of carrying oxygen to every part of the body. In Sickle cell, when the red cells have finished delivering their oxygen, they often become stiff and rigid and so block the tiny blood vessels. When this happens the vital supply of oxygen to some parts of the body is cut off. The body responds to this loss of oxygen with pain known as a painful Sickle crisis

What happens if I do get cold with Sickle cell disease?

Getting cold can bring on a painful Sickle crisis. This can happen in or outdoors in cold weather. Cold classrooms or work environments are a good example.

But why does cold weather affect people with sickle cell more than others?

In cold weather the blood vessels in the skin, especially in the hands, nose, face and feet respond to the cold by getting even smaller. This means the sickle red cells are even more likely to get stuck in the blood vessels cutting off oxygen and causing pain.

What sort of weather can make sickle cell worse?

Any cold, windy or rainy weather, can make the blood vessels smaller, making sickling of the red blood cells, and pain more likely. So walking to the bus on a cold morning or even swimming in a cool pool and getting chilly in the changing rooms can set off sickle pain.

When does the pain start if I get cold?

It may not be immediately but often some hours

later or even the next day. This may make you think you are not being affected by the cold, but then you have a pain crisis the next day.

Is there any evidence that cold weather or wind really make sickle pain happen?

It's difficult to prove, but if you talk to other people with Sickle they will often tell you, from their own experience, that the cold weather makes the pain happen. There is evidence that the wind can make painful crisis and hospital admission more likely. (see reference 1 and 2 below for more information)

What can I do to help stop pain happening in the cold weather?

- The main aim is to keep warm!
- Try not to go out on very cold days.
- Check the weather forecast first.
- If you do have to go out, try not to stand at a cold bus stops or in drafty stations. See if you can get a lift in a car!

What clothing can help keep me warm?

If you do go out wear warm clothes. Layers of clothes seem to work best. Also wear a hat, scarf, gloves and warm waterproof shoes. Keeping your head, hands and feet warm as well as your body is helpful.

What should I do at home?

Try to keep your house as warm as possible. Make sure your bed is warm too. Don't forget that if you are in receipt of certain welfare benefits, you may be entitled to discounts on your utility bills. (contact our team for further information)

It's expensive to keep my house warm is there any help or information available about this?

Look at the NHS website 'Keeping well keeping warm' may be helpful

There is a winter fuel allowance for those over 63 years' old Ask if there are benefits you are entitled to especially if you have children with Sickle cell

If there is a prolonged period of very cold weather, cold weather payments may be available

Is there more information about using heating efficiently and economically locally?

The Energy cafes are due to open in New Addington in the near future. Malcom Bell from the Croydon Healthy Homes team at Croydon council is particularly interested in helping people with Sickle cell. His team can provide practical advice and support on energy efficiency schemes which includes ways in which to reduce your utility bills and keep your home warm.

Should I change my diet in cold weather?

In cold weather we all need more food to keep warm! If you have Sickle cell you need extra calories , so in the cold this is even more important. Warm drinks and hot meals are comforting and warming. Try taking a flask with you if you have to go out.

I know infections such as coughs and colds are more common in cold wintry weather is this a problem for me with Sickle cell?

In winter there tend to be more viral and bacterial infections around. With Sickle cell these can be more troublesome if you catch them. These infections can spread easily so:

- Wash your hands when you get home after using the bus or train.
- Consider using a hand sanitiser when you are out.

- Make sure you have your flu vaccination every year.
- Don't miss your daily penicillin to keep pneumococcus (a cause of pneumonia) at bay!

So in summary if you have sickle cell treat cold weather with respect. Keep warm to keep well!

References and source of information

- 1 Nolan VG (2008) 'Association between wind speed and occurrence of sickle cell acute painful episodes: results of a cross over study' Br J Haematol 143 (30):pp 433-6
2. Jones et al (2005) 'Windy weather and low humidity are associated with an increased number of hospital admissions for acute pain and sickle cell disease in an urban environment with a maritime temperature climate' Br J Haematol 31 (4) pp 530-3

An informative video about the impact of the cold weather when living with Sickle Cell.

Sickle cell is cool: cold weather by Ade Aluko
<https://youtu.be/TzI28S0BpHw>



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Keep warm to keep well!



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