Usdaw

Campaigning For Equality

Women's Equality

Women's Health – Sickle Cell Anaemia

An advice leaflet for Usdaw Members

What is Sickle Cell Anaemia?

Sickle Cell Anaemia is an inherited condition passed on by both parents. It affects the red blood cells.

Our blood carries oxygen from the lungs to every part of our bodies in the haemoglobin. The haemoglobin is part of the red blood cells. When there is not enough oxygen in the blood we become anaemic.

Sickle Cell Anaemia is a disorder of the haemoglobin. When the red blood cells become short of oxygen they become sickle shaped. This is known as sickling.

Normal blood cell **Sickle-shaped cell**

In some circumstances sickling can give rise to symptoms. Sickling can also result in what is known as a Sickle Cell Crisis. This is discussed in the green tinted panel opposite.

Sickle Cell Anaemia is not contagious or infectious.

Who does it affect?

In the UK it is most common amongst people of African and Caribbean descent but can occur in people from India, Pakistan, the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean.

What about Sickle Cell Trait?

- Sickle Cell Trait is not to be confused with Sickle Cell Anaemia. It occurs when a person inherits the usual haemoglobin from one parent and sickle haemoglobin from the other.
- Sickle Cell Trait cannot change to Sickle Cell Anaemia.
- It is not contagious or infectious.
- It is not an illness. The Trait itself rarely causes health problems, though it may occasionally cause blood to appear in the urine and special care is required when having an operation or needing an anaesthetic.
- An important point is that if two people with Sickle Cell Trait have a baby, there is a one in four chance of the child being born with Sickle Cell Anaemia. There is a one in two chance that the child could inherit the Trait. There is a one in four chance of having a baby who is not affected by Sickle Cell Trait or Anaemia.

Sickle Cell Anaemia is an important issue for Usdaw

- Members with Sickle Cell Anaemia may need support from workmates and employers to deal with day-to-day concerns as well as Sickle Cell Crises.
- Women and men with Sickle Cell Anaemia or Trait will face difficult decisions about having children and extending families. The stress and pressure this may create can affect lives inside the workplace as well as outside.
- Women will usually be the people who deal with the day-to-day caring needs of children, partners and relatives as well as their own needs.
- During pregnancy Sickle Cell Crises are more common, so women with Sickle Cell Anaemia need special care.

How does a person know whether they have Sickle Cell Anaemia?

If you think you may be affected by Sickle Cell Anaemia or Sickle Cell Trait you can ask your doctor to refer you to the local hospital for a blood test. A special blood test can tell you whether you have Sickle Cell Trait or Sickle Cell Anaemia. These are very different so it is important to know whether the blood test has been positive for Sickle Cell Trait or Sickle Cell Anaemia.

Will there be any symptoms?

People with Sickle Cell Anaemia can be symptom-free for years. The effects of Sickle Cell Anaemia vary widely from person to person, but they can include the following:

- **Pain:** Because of their shape, sickle cells sometimes get stuck in the small blood vessels and prevent normal blood flow. These blockages can cause pain in the arms, legs, back and stomach. The pain can be mild to severe. Sickle Cell Anaemia may also cause swelling of the hands and feet or stiff and painful joints.
- **Infection:** Someone with Sickle Cell Anaemia is more prone to coughs, colds, sore throats and fever and to other more serious infectious illnesses, such as pneumonia.
- **Anaemia:** Because the red blood cells of people with Sickle Cell Anaemia do not last as long as usual, they can be anaemic (short of oxygen in the blood) and feel weak and lethargic.
- **Jaundice:** When red blood cells are destroyed more quickly than usual, the skin and eyes can sometimes look yellow.

What is a Sickle Cell Crisis?

- In some people the symptoms of the disorder may not be obvious. A Crisis can be triggered by a range of events, such as excessive physical exercise, pregnancy, having an anaesthetic.
- If the level of oxygen in the blood falls, the red blood cells harden into the sickle shape.
- Sickling can result in the cells clumping together and blocking off the blood vessels. This is known as a ‘Crisis’.
- A Crisis can be very painful and serious. Urgent medical attention should be sought.

Sickle Cell Anaemia is not contagious or infectious.

What can Usdaw do?

- Make sure our members and employers know about Sickle Cell Anaemia and its effects.
- Take up workplace issues such as:
  - Paid time off for screening.
  - Extended maternity leave with pay.
  - Procedures to ensure recognition of the effects of Sickle Cell Anaemia to avoid discrimination in hiring, in employment and in promotion.
  - The provision of a suitable working environment which takes the special needs of workers with Sickle Cell Anaemia into account.
  - The provision of confidential counselling and support services, helplines and other support.

Further information

The Sickle Cell Society provides information, support and counselling. It can also give details of local groups throughout the UK. Contact them at:

Sickle Cell Society
54 Station Road
Harlesden
London NW10 4UA

Tel: 020 8961 7795
web: www.sicklecellsociety.org

Usdaw contacts

To find out more about the work of the Divisional Equalities Forums and Usdaw's equality work or about joining Usdaw contact:

South Wales and Western Division

Cardiff Office
Tel: 029 2073 1131
email: cardiff@usdaw.org.uk

Eastern Division

Waltham Cross Office
Tel: 01992 709280
email: walthamx@usdaw.org.uk

Midlands Division

Redditch Office
Tel: 01527 406290
email: redditch@usdaw.org.uk

North Eastern Division

Leeds Office
Tel: 0113 232 1320
email: leeds@usdaw.org.uk

Scottish Division

Glasgow Office
Tel: 0141 427 6561
email: glasgow@usdaw.org.uk

Southern Division

Morden Office
Tel: 020 8687 5950
email: morden@usdaw.org.uk

North West Division

Warrington Office
Tel: 01925 578050
email: warrington@usdaw.org.uk

Equalities Section

Usdaw
188 Wilmslow Road
Manchester M14 6LJ
Tel: 0161 224 2804
email: equalitymatters@usdaw.org.uk

Improving workers' lives – Winning for members

www.usdaw.org.uk/equalities

Usdaw
Campaigning For Equality

Oct 2016 Published by: Usdaw, 188 Wilmslow Road, Manchester M14 6LJ WE WH 007