

# Sickle cell disease and COVID19: What do you need to know?

## Introduction

Coronavirus disease 19 (COVID-19) is a pandemic caused by a new virus, 2019 novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, which has currently affected more than a million people and has caused thousands of deaths worldwide.

Over 80% of people affected by COVID-19 develop mild symptoms or no symptoms, however the disease can cause severe respiratory illness, particularly in elderly persons and in patients with comorbidities (Other diseases) such as lung disease, heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, and low or impaired body defense system.

The COVID-19 spreads rapidly as the majority of affected people have mild symptoms or no symptoms, from person to person by close contact through respiratory droplets when an affected person is coughing, sneezing, spitting, and sometimes speaking, or by touching contaminated surfaces.

## What are the signs and symptoms of COVID-19?

Please remember people affected with COVID-19 may show no symptoms.

The most common COVID-19 symptoms include fever, chills, muscles aches and pains, cough, sore throat, loss of smell, headaches and diarrhea (Less commonly). Symptoms may occur 2-14 days after contact with COVID-19, however cases of patients who developed symptoms beyond 14 days after disease contact have been reported.

Please remember that these symptoms are suggestive, but not specific to COVID-19, and most importantly may overlap with Sickle Cell Disease symptoms.

Contact your treating medical doctor or sickle cell team if you develop a fever or symptoms suggestive of COVID-19, or if you develop other sickle cell related medical issues that would usually prompt you to call your team.

### **Please follow the following steps:**

- Seek early advice through your treating team where possible or your local medical officer (GP) except for true emergency where you should call the ambulance.
- Go to hospital as directed by your team.

This is really important to avoid you becoming very unwell at home. Calling early for advice and calling first before presenting to the emergency department is also very important. This is so your doctor can advise the emergency department that you are coming, and to give advice on the care you may need and as many health facilities across the country are taking steps to minimize unnecessary trips to hospitals.

### **Please seek urgent medical attention if you develop any of the following:**

- Difficulty breathing
- Persistent pain in chest
- Confusion, severe headache, increasing sleepiness or inability to stay awake.
- Blue discolouration to the lips or face, or darker lips and face appearance than usual.

## **Are patients with sickle cell disease at increased risk of COVID 19?**

At this stage, very little is known regarding the impact of COVID19 on patients with sickle cell disease. However there are significant concerns that Sickle Cell Disease patients, particularly elderly (> 50 years of age), those with history of chest crisis, iron overload, or additional other risk factors such underlying lung or cardiac disease, diabetes, and hypertension are at higher risk of developing more severe disease compared to the general population when affected by COVID-19, and also complications related to the disease.

### **What you need to do:**

- Exercise extra precautions to avoid COVID-19 and be prepared
- Stay at home as much as possible unless absolutely necessary and adhere strictly to other social isolation and prevention measures including washing your hands with soap and water for 20 seconds (Don't stop until you finish singing the "Alphabet song" once or "Happy Birthday" twice immediately after touching anyone or anything outside, using hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol, and physical distancing keeping at least 2 meters between you and another person. Please avoid travelling unless in case of emergency, in which case, it is important you discuss with your treating team.
- Make sure you have a thermometer and ensure you have adequate supply of your medications. There have been concerns about possible worsening condition of COVID-19 patients taking Ibuprofen, but at the current moment there is no published peer-reviewed scientific evidence to support this link.
- Stay healthy, ensure adequate fluid intake, and not to do excessive physical activities.
- Contact your treating team promptly when you develop symptoms suggestive of COVID-19 and follow the steps as mentioned above.
- Continue to follow your standard management plan of your SCD as per your treating team and continue your usual medications if you remain well, as poorly controlled SCD may put you at higher risk of sickle cell crisis. In the absence of myelosuppression, there is no evidence that the risk of COVID-19 is increased for the patients who are taking Hydroxyurea (Hydroxycarbamide). However, initiating this medication or dose escalation is not recommended as this may lead to increase need of blood testing and hospital visits during the outbreak of this pandemic.
- It is important to contact your treating team and discuss regarding rationalization of your physical appointments and other routines investigations, which may need to be deferred or rescheduled as these need to be minimized to reduce risk of viral transmission. Telehealth (Videocall) or telephone appointments are preferred when appropriate in the intervening time.
- Ensure to take flu vaccine, which may be organized through your GP.

- Visit our website and Australia Government Department of Health regularly as the information and advice regarding COVID-19 may quickly change.

### **What about blood transfusions for patients with Sickle cell disease?**

- Blood transfusion is still safe and there is currently no evidence that COVID-19 is transmitted by blood transfusion, and donors will be asked screening questions to ensure they are well when they donate blood.
- Continue your regular blood transfusions to prevent serious complications related to SCD unless instructed otherwise by your treating team.
- Your treating team may alter your transfusion plan if there are issues related to short blood supply.
- You can discuss further with your treating team if you have questions regarding your condition as your treating team may discuss whether there are other options for you.
- Encourage blood donation from those who are able to donate: [www.donateblood.com.au](http://www.donateblood.com.au)

### **Useful resources for information:**

[www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus](http://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus)

<https://www.sicklecellsociety.org/coronavirus-and-scd>

<https://ukts.org/heads-up/coronavirus-information>

National COVID19 hotline: 1800 675 398

#### References:

American Society of Hematology COVID19 resources

British Society Hematology - National Haemoglobinopathy Panel: Advice on COVID19 for SCD

This document has been Prepared by

**Dr Kongolo Kalumba MB ChB FCPI FRACP**

Consultant Paediatrician

Paediatric Clinical Haematologist

South East Melbourne Paediatrics

Phone: +61 3 98872526

Fax: +61 3 85260324

[www.sempaediatrics.com.au](http://www.sempaediatrics.com.au)

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