



**Treating sickle  
cell disease:  
Is hydroxyurea  
right for you?**



## What is sickle cell disease?

Sickle cell disease changes the shape and texture of hemoglobin, which is a protein in red blood cells. People with sickle cell disease have hemoglobin that makes red blood cells a different shape:



Normal Hemoglobin A makes red blood cells round and soft



Sickle cell disease Hemoglobin S makes red blood cells hard, sticky, and banana or sickle-shaped

The banana-shape of sickle cells block blood flow, which can cause:

- Pain
- Damage to organs, muscles, and tissues
- Sticky blood and damage to blood vessels due to:
  - Too many platelets (cells that help us stop bleeding when we get hurt)
  - Too many white blood cells (cells that protect us against infections)

3



The **Pacific Sickle Cell Regional Collaborative** works to ensure that people with sickle cell disease receive quality care, no matter where they live or seek care.

Funding for this brochure was provided, in part, by grant number U1EMC27862 from the Health Resources and Services Administration Sickle Cell Disease Treatment Demonstration Program to the Pacific Sickle Cell Regional Collaborative.

## What is hydroxyurea (HU)?

Hydroxyurea (HU) is a medicine that treats sickle cell disease. It can't cure you of sickle cell disease. But it can help you feel better if you take it every day and can help you stay healthy as you grow older.



## Research shows people who take Hydroxyurea:

- Live longer
- Have less pain
- Need fewer blood transfusions and hospital stays
- Have fewer cases of acute chest syndrome
- Have less damage to their brain, lungs, kidneys, and spleen

## What does it do?

HU helps red blood cells travel easily through the body.

- Helps red blood cells stay round and soft
- Lowers platelets and white blood cells to normal levels

## How does it work?

HU helps red blood cells make more of Hemoglobin F. This type of hemoglobin lowers the chances that red blood cells will change into the banana or sickle shape.

## Who is it for?

It's for people of all ages who have sickle cell disease:

- It helps babies and young children avoid health problems due to sickle cell disease
- It helps children and adults feel better, especially if they've had:
  - Severe pain
  - Severe anemia (A low number of red blood cells)
  - Several cases of acute chest syndrome
  - Problems with their internal organs

Don't take HU if you're pregnant or planning to get pregnant. Doctors don't know how HU might affect an unborn baby.

## Is hydroxyurea safe?

Yes. HU is safe when a doctor who sees lots of patients with sickle cell disease gives it to you and checks your blood levels often.

## What are the side effects?

There have been no serious side effects in people with sickle cell disease who have taken HU. The HU dose for sickle cell disease does not cause hair loss, throwing up, weakness, or loss of appetite.

### Short-term side effects:

- You may get a stomach ache. To prevent this, you can take HU during a meal.
- Men may make less sperm and sperm that move slowly. This usually returns to normal when they stop taking HU.

### Long-term side effects:

- Doctors aren't yet sure what the long-term side effects are. In the past, doctors thought that people who take HU might be more likely to get cancer. But they haven't found this to be true, even in people taking HU for more than 20 years.

## How does treatment work?

You will take HU by mouth once a day. HU comes in liquid or pill form.

You need to take HU every single day. This is because your body makes new sickle cells every day, so your daily amount of HU helps your body prevent sickle cells.

It may take months before you feel better because it takes that long to get the right amount of HU in your body. But you should still take it every day.



## Deciding on the HU dose

For the first several months, the doctor will give you a small amount of HU and check your blood levels monthly:

- If your levels of white blood cells and platelets stay normal, the doctor will slowly give you more HU over many months
- If your levels of white blood cells or platelets fall too low, the doctor will give you less HU

## You will have regular checkups

- After several months without problems, you will only need to see your doctor for checkups and blood work every two months. You will see the doctor more often if you have a problem.

## How can I learn more?

### Call your sickle cell doctor or nurse

They can answer any of your questions about HU.

6

Doctor's/Nurse's Names: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Phone Numbers: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Call your health insurance plan

Most health insurance plans cover HU. Check with your plan to find out if yours does.

### Visit these websites:

To watch a video about a family living with sickle cell disease: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iKQmQHh4E2w>

To get more in-depth information about HU: <http://sicklecell.nichq.org/resources/scd%20hydroxyurea%20resources>

To learn about HU research results: [http://consensus.nih.gov/2008/statement\\_sicklecell.htm](http://consensus.nih.gov/2008/statement_sicklecell.htm)

To find out how to prevent sickle cell disease symptoms: [www.vanderbilthealth.com/sicklecell/43990](http://www.vanderbilthealth.com/sicklecell/43990)

Notes:

7





PSCRC

The Pacific Sickle Cell Regional Collaborative works to ensure that people with sickle cell disease receive quality care, no matter where they live or seek care.



March 2016