



FOUNDATIONS
of Emergency Medicine

Foundations Frameworks

Approach to the Sickle Cell Crisis

Author: *Quentin Reuter, MD*

Editors: *Jon Van Heukelom, MD; Kristen Grabow Moore, MD, MEd*

Evaluate the following in every sickle cell patient:

- Cardiopulmonary signs/symptoms
- Hemoglobin and reticulocyte count
- Signs/symptoms concerning for vaso-occlusive or anemic crisis

Vaso-occlusive Crisis

- Typical SCC, consistent with previous exacerbations of pain
- Caused by anemia, dehydration, viral processes
- These patients typically have higher resting hemoglobin levels and won't have a drop in hemoglobin with vaso-occlusive crisis
- Management: pain control and rehydration
 - Fluids:
 - PO vs IV depending on level of dehydration/ability to take PO
 - IV fluid of choice: D5 ½ NS at maintenance rate
 - Severe dehydration/hypotension: NS bolus followed by D5 ½ NS
 - Opioids for pain control
 - If requiring ≥ 3 doses of pain medications, consider admission
 - Acetaminophen
 - Avoid NSAIDs as sickle cell patients typically have underlying renal dysfunction
- Evaluate for Acute Chest Syndrome
 - Leading cause of death in SC patients
 - 80% of patients have respiratory symptoms or fever
 - Diagnosis: infiltrate on XR chest plus hypoxia, fever, CP, or respiratory signs/symptoms
 - Treatment: antibiotics, fluid resuscitation as needed, exchange transfusion (or RBC transfusion to temporize), hematology consult, consider admission to ICU

Anemic Crisis

- > 2 g/dL drop from baseline hemoglobin
- Obtain hemoglobin, reticulocyte count
- Rule-out other sources of bleeding (GI)
- 3 general categories:
 - Transient Red Cell Aplasia
 - Typically, from viral infection (classically Parvovirus B19)
 - Well appearing
 - Low reticulocyte counts
 - Keep away from pregnant females

- Splenic Sequestration
 - Typically occurs in pediatric patients (because they haven't auto-infarcted their spleen yet)
 - Large spleen on exam, LUQ pain
 - Rapid drop in hemoglobin, may be in hemodynamic shock/extremis
 - Need emergent resuscitative transfusion
 - High reticulocyte count
 - Rare in adults but possible
- Hemolytic Crisis
 - Typical hemolytic crisis in SC patient
 - Lab abnormalities associated with hemolysis include:
 - Elevated LDH, elevated reticulocyte count, elevated LFTs/bilirubin
 - Transfuse when indicated

Special Circumstances

- Always consider/evaluate the following diagnoses in sickle cell patients:
 - Hyphemia, priapism, CVA, gallstones, osteomyelitis, sepsis, and fever (no functional spleen)

References:

- Adams, J et al. Emergency Medicine: Clinical Essentials, Second Edition. Emergency Management of Red Blood Cell Disorders, pp. 1702-1713. 2013.
- Glassberg, J, Weingart, S. Sickle Cell Disease Update. August and September 2012. Emrap.org