

students with sickle cell disease

What is sickle cell disease?

Sickle cell disease is a chronic, inherited blood disorder. It most commonly affects individuals of African-American or African descent, but it can also impact people of Hispanic or Indian heritage. The disease is caused by an abnormality in hemoglobin, the protein in red blood cells that carries oxygen. The abnormality causes the red blood cells change into a sickle shape in low-oxygen areas of the body. These cells break down easily and can block blood vessels, leading to:

- Anemia (low red blood cell count)
- Joint and bone pain
- Increased risk of infection
- Stroke
- Organ and tissue damage

Children with sickle cell disease may also be smaller than their peers, experience fatigue, have yellowish eyes (jaundice), and in some cases, experience priapism (painful, prolonged erections). There are several types of sickle cell disease, and symptoms vary from child to child.

How can sickle cell disease affect a student at school?

Sickle cell disease affects each student differently. Some may have few complications, while others may face significant challenges. With proper medical care, school support, and family involvement, students with sickle cell disease can thrive and perform at the same level as their peers. Children may struggle in the following areas:

- **Academic:** frequent absences due to hospitalization or pain crises, learning difficulties caused by stroke (motor, sensory, memory issues), trouble focusing and paying attention, visual-spatial processing challenges

How can schools support students with sickle cell disease?

Academic

- Start academic interventions under **Section 504** or **IDEA** (Other Health Impairment).
- If a student has had a stroke or shows academic concerns, consider special education services.
- Request an **occupational therapy (OT) evaluation** for motor skill concerns.
- Review any **neuropsychological testing** to better understand the student's learning profile.
- Offer **before or after school tutoring** if the student's health allows.
- Assign a **manageable workload** focused on **quality over quantity**.
- Allow **extra time** for assignments, projects, quizzes, and tests.
- Offer **preferential seating** to reduce distractions.
- Provide **printed copies of notes**, highlighted materials, and recorded lessons.
- Use **multi-sensory teaching methods** (visual, auditory, tactile) and repetition.
- Teach **memory strategies** (acronyms, rhymes, concept mapping).
- Review **abstract concepts** regularly before introducing new ones.

Social and Emotional

- Provide **staff training** and share relevant information about the condition.
- Evaluate the **need for counseling** if the student becomes withdrawn or struggles socially.
- Assign a **trusted adult** as a point of contact for concerns.
- Maintain **frequent communication** between the student, family, school nurse, and medical team.

Physical

- Permit **rest breaks** or shortened school days as needed.
- Allow **water bottles** during the day.
- Provide frequent **bathroom breaks** as needed.
- Allow participation in **physical education** as tolerated.
- Offer **indoor alternatives** during extreme temperatures.

More Resources

- **MedlinePlus - Sickle Cell Disease**
medlineplus.gov
- **National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute**
nhlbi.nih.gov/
- **Sickle Cell Disease Association of America**
sicklecelldisease.org/

SCHOOL SERVICES

For more information, visit childrens.com/school-services

