

# Using Hydroxycarbamide (Hydroxyurea)

## Information for adult patients with sickle cell disease

This information sheet has been given to you to help answer some of the questions you may have about taking hydroxycarbamide for the management of sickle cell disease (SCD). It contains information on the benefits and risks of taking hydroxycarbamide, how to take and store it, and how it works, including the changes it causes in the blood.

If you have any questions or concerns, please speak to a doctor or nurse caring for you.

### What is hydroxycarbamide?

Hydroxycarbamide is a medicine taken in capsule form. It causes changes in the blood, which reduce the frequency of sickle cell crises and the need for transfusion in some patients with sickle cell disease. It used to be called hydroxyurea.

### How does hydroxycarbamide work?

Sickle cell disease (SCD) is a condition where the patient inherits a different form of haemoglobin (haemoglobin is the chemical in red blood cells that carries oxygen). This different haemoglobin causes the red blood cells to sickle (change from a soft, round disc into a hard sickle or banana shape).

Hydroxycarbamide increases the amount of foetal or 'baby' haemoglobin (HbF) in red blood cells. Foetal haemoglobin is the main haemoglobin found in babies before birth but its production tails off after birth. Most adults only have a very small amount of HbF present in their red cells (less than 1%). Hydroxycarbamide switches part of this production back on and as a result, the level of HbF starts to rise again. HbF prevents blood cells from sickling. Giving hydroxycarbamide to sickle cell patients will reduce the severity of sickle cell disease in some patients by:

- increasing the time that red blood cells survive in the body, which in turn reduces both anaemia (low haemoglobin) and jaundice (yellow eyes)
- making the red blood cells and the lining of the blood vessels less sticky, so the blood vessels are less likely to be blocked by clumps of sickle cells
- reducing the number of white blood cells, especially the cells called neutrophils.

Neutrophils are important in fighting infection in the body, but the high neutrophil counts often seen in people with sickle cell disease can cause inflammation and trigger sickle cell

crises and other complications reducing the number of the blood cells involved in clotting (platelets).

## **Will hydroxycarbamide work for me?**

Hydroxycarbamide does not work for all patients with SCD, but most feel an improvement in their health within three months of starting treatment.

You will need to discuss the treatment with your doctor or sickle cell nurse in the sickle cell clinic.

Hydroxycarbamide is often recommended if:

1. you have moderately severe or severe sickle cell disease;
2. you have had three or more acute hospital admissions for sickle cell crisis in the last 12 months;
3. you have experienced acute sickle chest syndrome and needed a blood transfusion or admission to the high dependency unit and/or
4. you have had a stroke and are no longer tolerating an exchange blood transfusion programme.

## **Do I have a choice about taking hydroxycarbamide?**

It is entirely your choice whether to start taking hydroxycarbamide and for how long you take it.

If you agree to start this treatment, your doctor will ask you to sign a consent form. This confirms that you understand why hydroxycarbamide has been recommended for you and the risks and benefits of the treatment.

If, after discussing everything with your haematologist you still feel uncertain, you do not have to take it. It has been recommended as a treatment option for you, on the basis of your particular diagnosis of sickle cell disease, but this does not mean you have to choose this treatment. We will support you whatever decision you make about your treatment as we want to keep you as healthy as possible. Some people find talking things through with their consultant, sickle specialist nurse or psychologist helpful in coming to a decision. We can also put you in touch with people who already take hydroxycarbamide, so you can ask them any questions, although of course their experience might not be the same as yours would be.

If you do start taking hydroxycarbamide but then decide to stop, we strongly recommend that you discuss this with your haematologist. When you stop taking it, your other treatment will continue as it did before you started taking hydroxycarbamide.

## What are the benefits of taking hydroxycarbamide?

- It should reduce the number and severity of crises.
- It should reduce the risk of sickle cell chest syndrome (chest crisis).
- You will need fewer blood transfusions.
- It can increase your life expectancy.
- It can improve quality of life.

Hydroxycarbamide **does not** reduce the frequency of, or prevent, the following sickle cell complications:

- leg ulcers
- bone damage (avascular necrosis)
- infections.

The role of hydroxycarbamide in preventing stroke is not clear and is still being researched. It is also uncertain if hydroxycarbamide is effective in preventing painful erections of the penis (priapism).

**Hydroxycarbamide is not a painkiller** but it may help pain by reducing the number of times you experience painful crises.

## What are the side-effects of hydroxycarbamide?

Hydroxycarbamide affects the bone marrow, where all your blood cells are formed.

This may occasionally lead to:

- anaemia (a fall in the haemoglobin level);
- a low white cell count, which may increase the likelihood of infection if the levels are very low;

**or**

- a low platelet count, which may increase the likelihood of bleeding and bruising if the levels are very low.

The signs of a bone marrow problem are increased tiredness, sore throat, infections or high temperatures and increased bleeding and bruising. If you notice any of these you should stop the hydroxycarbamide, contact your haematologist or clinical nurse specialist and attend hospital for an urgent blood test.

**It is important that you seek urgent medical advice as soon as you recognise that you have these symptoms.**

Less common side-effects include:

- nausea and vomiting
- loss of appetite
- sore mouth and mouth ulcers
- diarrhoea

- thinning of the hair
- gout (and you should tell your doctor if you have had gout before)
- skin rash
- darkening of the colour of your skin and nails.

These side-effects are usually mild and can be treated simply and effectively by your doctor.

## **Is there a risk of developing cancer by taking hydroxycarbamide?**

Hydroxycarbamide is a very mild form of chemotherapy. It has been used in a range of blood and bone marrow diseases that can change into leukaemia over time. In these patients, who already have an abnormal bone marrow and an increased risk of developing cancer, hydroxycarbamide therapy has been linked to an increased risk of cancer.

Because of this, hydroxycarbamide was at first only given to patients with sickle cell disease who were extremely unwell, with few other alternatives. It was then given to more and more adult patients and finally to children. Hydroxycarbamide has now been used for more than 15 years in hundreds of patients with sickle cell disease across the world. Over that time, only a handful of cancer cases have been reported, which is no more than we would expect in the normal population. Long-term data shows there is probably no increased risk of developing cancer if you take hydroxycarbamide.

On the other hand, comparisons have been made over a ten year period between people with sickle cell disease taking the drug and those who do not. More people who took the hydroxycarbamide were alive at the end of the ten years, than those who did not.

## **Taking hydroxycarbamide**

It is very important that hydroxycarbamide dosage is prescribed and controlled by a specialist doctor within the sickle cell clinic. We will prescribe the hydroxycarbamide in the clinic and check your blood count regularly all the time that we are prescribing it. It is important that you attend blood tests and clinic appointments not just to monitor your blood results but also to assess you for any side effects which you might be feeling.

## **How much hydroxycarbamide will I have to take?**

Hydroxycarbamide will be given to you in a capsule form and is taken by mouth. It can be taken with food or on an empty stomach.

Each capsule contains 500mg of hydroxycarbamide.

Treatment starts at a low dose and is slowly built up if your body tolerates it well and you are not feeling any side effects. Typical doses for adult sickle cell patients range from one to four capsules each day. The dose you are given will depend on your body weight,

kidney function and individual tolerance. Some patients can only tolerate lower doses. The dose is changed depending on your blood counts. Your doctors are aiming to reach the highest possible dose that your bone marrow will tolerate. The exact dose is less important than the effect it is having on your blood counts and the HbF level in your red blood cells.

**If you take more than prescribed, this can stop your bone marrow working normally which can cause serious health problems.**

## **Do I have to take hydroxycarbamide all the time?**

For hydroxycarbamide to work properly you have to take it every day. However, if you have an infection and temperature you should stop taking it and seek medical advice. During office hours you can contact the Sickle Cell Team at St George's University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust on the numbers at the end of this leaflet. At other times you will need to attend your local Accident and Emergency (A&E) Department. Normally, your haematologist (sickle cell blood doctor) will recommend that you restart hydroxycarbamide when your blood count has been checked and is normal.

## **What if I forget to take a dose of hydroxycarbamide?**

Take your normal dose the next day, but **do not take a double dose**. Also, tell your haematologist the next time you go to clinic how many times you have missed a dose. If you are sick (vomit) just after taking your capsules, you should ask your haematologist for advice.

## **For how long should I take it?**

You should continue to take hydroxycarbamide, as advised, unless your haematologist or another doctor tells you not to. If you want to stop taking it, please talk to your haematologist beforehand. If after a trial period of several months there has been no medical benefit to your sickle cell disease, despite taking the right dose of hydroxycarbamide, your doctors will advise you to stop taking the drug.

## **How will my health be monitored?**

When you start taking hydroxycarbamide, you will need to see the haematologists and have blood tests (blood counts, HbF level, liver and kidney function) regularly. At first, or if the dose is changed, you will be seen at least every two weeks. As soon as your blood measures are stable on the hydroxycarbamide you will be seen every eight to twelve weeks.

Your dose may be reduced if your blood count falls or if your liver and kidney blood tests show any changes. We will not be able to prescribe hydroxycarbamide if you are not able to come for regular blood tests, as we need to be able to monitor you.

## When will I notice any improvement in my sickle cell disease?

It usually takes at least three months before sickle cell patients can tell if the hydroxycarbamide is working, so it is important to give the medication time to work and for you to take it as prescribed. **Hydroxycarbamide will not work if you only take it every now and again or only when you are ill or in pain.**

## Looking after your hydroxycarbamide

1. Keep the capsules in a cool dry place.
2. Keep the capsules out of the reach of children. They can be harmful if children swallow them.
3. If you stop taking hydroxycarbamide for any reason, please return your capsules to the pharmacy. Do not throw them in the bin or flush them down the toilet.

## Can I take other medications whilst I am taking hydroxycarbamide?

You should tell your doctor about all the other medications you are taking when you start using hydroxycarbamide. Occasionally the dosage will need to be changed because of your other medications. You should also tell your doctor if you start any new medications. This includes medicines bought at a pharmacy or elsewhere.

## Is there any risk to my fertility or pregnancy whilst taking hydroxycarbamide?

### For men:

Hydroxycarbamide does not stop men from having normal erections. It does not prevent you from getting someone pregnant or fathering children. However, a man's sperm count may be reduced and there is a possibility of abnormal sperm being produced while taking hydroxycarbamide. This will usually return to normal after the hydroxycarbamide has been stopped for two to three months.

**We recommend that you continue to use contraception whilst using hydroxycarbamide and that you stop using hydroxycarbamide at least three months before trying for a baby.**

In one or two cases the sperm count has not returned to normal, even when hydroxycarbamide was stopped for over a year. We therefore recommend that a sperm sample is checked before you start hydroxycarbamide and that a sperm sample is stored. Your haematologist can organise for you to go and have this done.

### For women:

Women should not become pregnant while they or their partner is taking hydroxycarbamide, as research suggests that foetal abnormalities may occur.

You should use an effective form of contraception to avoid pregnancy. You can ask your general practitioner (GP), practice nurse or the sickle cell team for further advice.

**If you become pregnant** you must stop the hydroxycarbamide and inform your doctor immediately.

## What if my partner and I want to have a baby?

If you or your partner is taking hydroxycarbamide, you should stop taking it at least three months before trying to conceive. This will reduce the risk to your baby. You must discuss this with your haematologist first.

## Can I breast feed my baby while taking hydroxycarbamide?

You should not breast feed while taking hydroxycarbamide, as small amounts of the drug may be present in your breast milk. You can either breast feed and not take hydroxycarbamide or bottle feed your baby and start taking hydroxycarbamide again. You should discuss this with your haematologist before making a decision.

## Further information

An information leaflet is provided by the manufacturer in each box of medicine. It is important that you read both the manufacturer's leaflet and this information sheet. Please note that the brand of hydroxycarbamide that we prescribe at St George's University Hospital NHS Foundation Trust is not licensed for the treatment of sickle cell disease.

Your consultant will discuss this with you in more detail. For further information on unlicensed medicines, please ask for a copy of our trust leaflet **Unlicensed medicines – a guide for patients**, or contact our Medicines Helpline (contact details at the end of the leaflet).

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to speak with the haematologists, sickle cell specialist nurses or day unit nurses.

## Contact us

**If you have any questions about your condition, please discuss with a member of the Red Cell haematology team at your next appointment or using the details below.**

**Dr Elizabeth Rhodes** (lead sickle cell and thalassaemia consultant)

**Tel:** 020 8725 0885

**Dr Julia Sikorska** (sickle cell and thalassaemia consultant)

**Tel:** 020 8725 0885



**Carol Rose** (clinical nurse specialist)

**Tel:** 07825 978812

**Sickle cell and thalassaemia secretary**

**Tel:** 020 8725 0885

**Pharmacy medicines helpline:**

For information about any medicines that you have been prescribed at St George's University Hospital you can speak to the staff caring for you or call our **Patient helpline** 020 8725 1033

**For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit [www.stgeorges.nhs.uk](http://www.stgeorges.nhs.uk)**

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## Additional services

### Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS can offer you on-the-spot advice and information when you have comments or concerns about our services or the care you have received. You can visit the PALS office between 9.30am and 4.30pm, Monday to Friday in the main corridor between Grosvenor and Lanesborough wings (near the lift foyer).

**Tel:** 020 8725 2453 **Email:** [pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk)

### NHS Choices

NHS Choices provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make decisions about your health.

**Web:** [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

### NHS 111

You can call 111 when you need medical help fast but it's not a 999 emergency. NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones.

**Tel:** 111

### AccessAble

You can download accessibility guides for all of our services by searching 'St George's Hospital' on the AccessAble website ([www.accessable.co.uk](http://www.accessable.co.uk)). The guides are designed to ensure everyone – including those with accessibility needs – can access our hospital and community sites with confidence.

