

## **Sickle Cell Disease**

African Americans face disproportionate health disparities when it comes to health challenges such as diabetes, high blood pressure, asthma, and cancer to name a few. One of the health challenges that uniquely affects African Americans is known as Sickle Cell Disease or SCD. Sickle cell disease is an inherited disease in African American people that causes red blood cells to become hard and sticky and look like a C-shaped which is called a 'sickle'. Having sickle cell means that the cells you have do not bend and can block blood flow to the rest of your body. The blocked blood flow can lead to several serious problems such as eye problems, stroke, infections, and episodes of a serious pain called 'crises'.

Sickle cell is a lifelong illness and there is no one way to cure it. There is a procedure known as the 'blood and bone transplant' which replaces blood-forming stem cells that aren't working properly with healthy donor cells. If the procedure is successful then it can be cured. However, it comes with risk if the patient is older. There is also a medicine you can take to help treat sickle cell that can help reduce symptoms. The medicine is called 'Voxelotor' and it treats sickle cell disease in adults and children 4 years or older. This medicine helps hemoglobin hold onto more oxygen and to stop red blood cells from becoming unordinary.

Sickle cell is common in ancestors of sub-Saharan Africa, Spanish-speaking regions in the Western Hemisphere, Saudi Arabia, and other Mediterranean countries. Sickle cell occurs in about 1 of every 365 African American births. The impact SCD has on African Americans is at a disproportionate rate. The reason for this is because it is an evolutionary trait that individuals developed in the response to help protect them from Malaria. Malaria is a disease out of sub-Saharan Africa caused by a parasite which could cause anemia and jaundice because of the loss of red blood cells. Over time, African bodies adapted to form the sickle shape in order to prevent blood loss. In protecting itself against one disease, it inadvertently created another.

Sickle cell disease affects 8 - 10% of the African American population. There have been some notable African Americans that have shed light on this disease and supported causes to find a cure.

Musicians T-Boz (from TLC) and Prodigy, and former NFL player Tiki Barber suffer from this disease. According to T-Boz she was told that due to her having sickle cell that she would not live past 30. She is now 52 years old. She also was told she would be disabled wouldn't be able to have kids. She now has one child and is not disabled. She was told that she would have all these problems due to sickle cell but she didn't let that stop her and she overcame these challenges. Rapper Prodigy was diagnosed with sickle cell at three months old. He has talked in public about how it felt when the pain kicked in. He would have to use a wheelchair because it hurt too much to walk. Tiki Barber also suffers from sickle cell and helps others who have it learn more about the disorder, as well as learn more about the possibility of iron overload, which can stem from regular blood transfusions during sickle cell treatment.

In conclusion, African Americans face numerous health disparities due to various reasons and sickle cell disease is one of those challenges. There are many supporters and vocal proponents of spreading awareness about sickle cell and pushing for a cure. It's difficult to hear about the challenges people with sickle cell face; however, it is encouraging to also hear how they persevered and continued to live fruitful and prosperous lives.