



Nutrition for the Child with Sickle Cell Anemia

By Marisa Moore, MBA, RDN, LD

Published June 19, 2018



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Sickle cell disease, also called sickle cell anemia, is a genetic red blood cell disorder that causes blood cells to take on a sickle or crescent shape. In the U.S., sickle cell anemia is most common among African Americans and Hispanic Americans. People with sickle cell anemia often experience episodes of pain, fatigue and frequent infections. Sickle cell anemia is associated with low calcium intake, vitamin D deficiency and poor appetite. All of these can lead to delayed growth and development in children.

If your child gets enough calcium, keep up the good work! However, calcium alone is not enough. Calcium is effective at building strong bones only if your child also gets enough vitamin D. Make sure your child consumes vitamin D-fortified milk and gets adequate active play time outdoors. Children with darker skin may be more likely to be vitamin D deficient.

Vitamin D supplements can be helpful. Discuss vitamin D with your child's healthcare provider. Calcium and vitamin D are important for your child's growth and development, but good overall nutrition is essential. Meanwhile, keep these tips in mind to maximize your child's nutrition:

- Make good nutrition a family affair so your child doesn't feel punished when they're drinking milk and everyone else has a soft drink.

- Eat from a rainbow of fruits and vegetables paired with grains, proteins (such as eggs, fish, chicken, lean meat, beans or tofu) and nuts.
- Get plenty of calcium-rich foods such as low-fat or fat-free milk, yogurt, and cheese, leafy green vegetables and calcium-fortified foods such as soymilk, orange juice and tofu.
- Provide healthy, high-calorie foods including dried fruit, nuts and nut butters, or smoothies if your child doesn't have much of an appetite.
- Discuss vitamin D testing and supplementation with your healthcare provider. While sun exposure, eggs, fortified milk and yogurt provide vitamin D, it often is difficult to replenish vitamin D with food alone.
- Encourage plenty of water to prevent constipation.
- Forgo sugar-sweetened drinks for milk or calcium-fortified orange juice, which provide better nutrition.

Understandably, it may be easier said than done. Busy families find cooking at home to be challenging. Enjoying a meal together as a family is important, especially for a child with a chronic illness.

Work with a **registered dietitian nutritionist** to better understand your child's unique nutrition needs and identify quick and healthy meals that will work for the entire family.

Reviewed May 2018

Marisa Moore, MBA, RDN, LD, is an Atlanta-based registered dietitian nutritionist.

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