

What is Priapism?

Priapism is a prolonged and painful erection of the penis that happens or continues without sexual arousal. Patients with sickling disorders (particularly HbSS) are more prone to this condition. Adolescents and young men are affected most often but children can also suffer priapism.

The majority of males with sickle cell disease will have experienced an episode of priapism by the time they reach adulthood. Sickling of red blood cells within the penis interferes with blood flow back to the body resulting in inflammation and a build-up of pressure. Very prolonged episodes of priapism may lead to problems getting an erection (erectile dysfunction). Prompt treatment of severe episodes is very important to prevent this.

What are the types of Priapism?

Stuttering

- Shorter episodes lasting minutes up to four hours are described as stuttering priapism. This type of priapism can occur frequently. Whilst less serious, it does increase the chance of having an acute episode so you should always tell your Haematologist if this is happening.
- Patients with frequent episodes may be given medicines to control and prevent this.

Fulminant

- This is when an episode of priapism lasts **over four hours**. This is an emergency and if not treated promptly, permanent damage to the penis can occur.

What triggers Priapism?

In the same way that they can trigger a crisis, fatigue, cold, dehydration and infection all increase the chances of priapism. It can occur together with a painful crisis.

What can I do to prevent it happening?

- Maintain a good fluid intake.
- Empty your bladder before going to bed at night.
- Make sure you get enough sleep
- Alcohol, tobacco and recreational drugs like marijuana and cocaine can all cause priapism. Use of Viagra (sildenafil) can also increase the risk. Avoiding these can reduce the risk of priapism.
- If you suffer from priapism tell your doctor before starting new medicines.

What do I do when I get priapism?

- Take your usual pain relief medication
- Try and empty your bladder
- Increase your fluid intake
- Gentle exercise e.g. walking
- Sometimes a warm bath or shower may help
- **Do not apply ice or use cold water, this may make the priapism worse**

If you have tried the above measures without success or the **priapism has been present for more than three hours** you must either attend your nearest Accident and Emergency Department or Haematology Unit for urgent assessment (see local contacts below for details).

What will happen then?

You will be seen by a doctor and given pain relief and fluids. You may also be given medication to try and resolve the priapism. They will take blood samples and you may be given a blood transfusion. You will also see a specialist surgeon (Urologist) if these measures fail.

Don't forget

- Priapism is a common problem for people with sickle cell disease.
- You should not feel embarrassed or ashamed if this happens to you.
- It is very important for your Haematologist to know if you suffer from priapism.
- They may ask if you have ever had problems of this sort and it is important to give an accurate answer so that they can treat you properly.
- Do not be afraid to ask them for advice if you have any concerns.

Local Contact Information

Consultant

Specialist registrar

Accident & Emergency Department



SPAH

SCOTTISH PAEDIATRIC AND ADULT HAEMOGLOBINOPATHIES NETWORK



Information about Priapism in a young person with Sickle Cell Disease