

# Priapism

**Priapism** is a persistent, painful erection of the penis. It happens to many boys and men with sickle cell disease.

It may lead to **impotence** (the inability to have a normal erection or have sex).

## What are some types of Priapism?

### Stuttering

Recurrent painful erections that last several hours or even days. The penis becomes erect (hard) and then goes away. This repeats many times over several hours.

### Prolonged – This is an emergency!

Painful erection that does not go away for 2 or more hours. **Call the medical provider right away!** Medicines or surgery may be needed to stop the erection. Severe priapism can lead to partial or complete impotence.

### Persistent

Persistent hardening of the penis that may last for weeks to years. This type of priapism is usually painless. It usually develops after a long episode of priapism and often causes impotence.

### Specific causes of priapism in patients with sickle cell anemia are unknown.

Acute attacks often begin during sleep or after sexual activity. Dehydration and recreational or “street drugs” can also make priapism more likely. Patients with repeated attacks of priapism should urinate frequently to keep their bladder from becoming too full.

## When priapism first starts, try

- A warm bath
- Mild exercise, such as running up and down stairs or jogging in place for 5 minutes
- Urinating (going pee)
- Oral medicine such as Sudafed® may help some patients. Take medications for priapism only as directed by your doctor.

**NOTE:** If priapism continues for **more than 2 hours**, you **must** come to the clinic or emergency department for treatment.

## Treatment for Acute episodes includes IV fluids, pain medication, and possibly surgery.

Surgery is usually very effective at fixing the priapism, and patients feel better afterwards.



## Possible treatments for Chronic issues:

- Hydroxyurea is a daily medicine that can reduce complications of sickle cell disease, including priapism.
- Monthly blood transfusions can also prevent priapism.
- Blocking testosterone, the male hormone, with medicines prevents priapism but may prevent normal sexual function as well.
- Sometimes a combination of these treatments is recommended.