



## Sickle Cell Disease: More Than Just Growing Pains

(NAPS)—It's what every parent wishes they could do for their child: solve the impossible.

For Vesha Jamison, that journey began when doctors raised the flag that he needed blood—immediately. But the one item that could help alleviate his excruciating pain was not available. The nation was on the cusp of a blood shortage.

“Over the course of two days [waiting for blood], he got progressively worse,” Vesha said.

Right now, patients of all ages needing blood face that same frightening uncertainty, as supply levels are down 25%. Back-to-back disasters and increased travel have strained the blood supply, especially for people with sickle cell disease who may rely on transfusions.

### Just a Normal Kid

Dreylan, now 13 years old, has lots of energy. “And I love all sports,” said Dreylan. But the pain Dreylan faces from sickle cell crises has been so severe that he has had to stay home for roughly half of the school year.

“It's like getting hit with a baseball bat,” he said of the pain that floods him, leaving him unable to get out of bed sometimes.

His social life also suffers. “Sometimes, kids at school look at me funny, like they can catch it or something,” he said.

### Reality of Sickle Cell

Vesha discovered Dreylan's diagnosis when he was just four weeks old through the newborn sickle cell screening process. Sickle cell trait is inherited, meaning that a person with the trait received a sickle cell gene from at least one parent but does not have sickle cell disease. Many people are unaware they carry the trait, as testing at birth was not widely provided until 2006.

“It was heartbreaking,” Vesha said. “I felt very guilty...like I had given him the worst part of me. I knew all my life that I had the trait, but not the full extent of what that meant.”

When one has sickle cell, red blood cells are distorted from their usual round, healthy shape to a crescent one, making it difficult to flow through the



### Vesha Jamison and her son Dreylan rely on blood donations to relieve the pain of his sickle cell disease.

bloodstream and carry oxygen to the body—often leading to severe pain, tissue and organ damage, anemia and strokes. But Dreylan feels better almost immediately after receiving a blood transfusion. “I can move around and play because I have my energy back,” he said.

Finding compatible blood matches for patients with sickle cell disease is not easy. These patients often receive the most compatible blood from donors in the Black community as blood donors who are Black are almost three times more likely to be a match, compared with donors who are not Black or African American.

### How to Help

When the blood eventually arrived for Dreylan in 2021, so did relief. “I say a little prayer for whoever donated that blood when the bag is being hung by Dreylan's bedside,” Vesha said, teary-eyed. “It's my family today and could be yours tomorrow.”

In October, the Red Cross is raising awareness about sickle cell through *Joined by Blood*, a fall activation of its Sickle Cell Initiative. The Red Cross is also teaming up with partners in the Black community—such as 100 Black Men of America, Inc., Kier's Hope Foundation, Inc. and others—to host blood drives and rally blood donors who are Black to support the blood transfusion needs of patients with sickle cell.