Sickle Cell Retinopathy

What is sickle cell retinopathy?
Sickle cell retinopathy is a condition that can cause permanent damage to the eyes of a person with sickle cell disease. It can happen in any type of sickle cell disease.

What causes sickle cell retinopathy?
Sickle cell retinopathy happens when sickled red blood cells block the tiny blood vessels in the back of the eyes. The eye then makes new, thinner blood vessels to go around the blocked vessels. These new vessels are often much weaker and can cause bleeding into the eye. Sometimes the retina (the seeing part of the eye) is damaged and comes loose. Permanent damage or blindness can happen if retinopathy is not caught in time.

What are the symptoms of sickle cell retinopathy?
- Usually there are no symptoms in the early stages.
- Damage has already happened when vision problems occur.

How to prevent sickle cell retinopathy:
Eye examinations by a special eye doctor (ophthalmologist) need to be done once a year starting at age 7 years. This doctor will put drops in your child’s eyes to dilate (open up) the pupils of the eye so the blood vessels can be looked at with a special machine. Always tell the eye doctor that your child has sickle cell disease so he can look for retinopathy.

How to treat sickle cell retinopathy:
- If caught early, most problems can be treated by the eye doctor.
- Laser treatments may be used to correct some problems.
- Surgery is sometimes needed.

Call the sickle cell nurse or doctor at (816) 234-3265 (Monday through Friday, 8 am to 5 pm) for any questions or concerns about sickle cell retinopathy.