Gallstones in Sickle Cell Disease

What are gallstones?
The gallbladder is a small sac near the liver. It holds bile which is used to help digest food. Gallstones are formed in the gallbladder. Some of these stones may cause abdominal pain and others may not. Many people with sickle cell disease will have gallstones, but usually not until their teenage years or later. Not everyone with sickle cell disease will develop gallstones.

What causes gallstones?
Gallstones happen more often in people with sickle cell disease because sickled red blood cells break down much faster than normal red blood cells. When these break down, they release bilirubin. Bilirubin turns into bile that then collects in the gallbladder and can form sludge or gallstones.

What are the symptoms of gallstones?
- Pain on the right side of the belly
- Nausea (sick to the stomach or queasy)
- Vomiting or bloating, especially after eating greasy or spicy foods
- Yellow eyes

How are gallstones diagnosed and treated?
- Let your child’s doctor know of any of the above symptoms.
- X-rays or an ultrasound may be done to look for gallstones.
- If symptoms are mild, your child may just be watched over time.
- If symptoms are worse, surgery may be needed to take out the gallbladder.
- Your child should avoid greasy and spicy foods if this causes stomach pain.

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