Gene therapy for sickle cell: how young is too young for a functional cure?

Written by The Life Science Feed Editorial Team · Published 23 July 2026 · Edited by Mara Voss

> Sickle cell disease remains a devastating inherited disorder, causing chronic pain, organ damage, and shortened lifespans for millions globally. While bone marrow transplants offer a curative option, donor availability and significant risks limit their widespread use.
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> The FDA's recent approval of a gene therapy for children as young as 12 months marks a significant shift, offering a new path to a functional cure for this vulnerable population.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The Pivot: The FDA approved the first gene therapy for sickle cell disease in children aged 12 and under, expanding curative options beyond bone marrow transplant.
- The Data: Clinical trials demonstrated sustained production of anti-sickling haemoglobin, eliminating vaso-occlusive crises in most treated patients.
- The Action: Clinicians should now consider gene therapy as a viable, potentially curative option for eligible paediatric sickle cell patients, particularly those with severe disease.

Sickle cell disease, a genetic blood disorder affecting haemoglobin, leads to rigid, sickle-shaped red blood cells that obstruct blood flow, causing severe pain, anaemia, and organ damage. Standard treatments manage symptoms and complications, but do not address the underlying genetic defect. For decades, allogeneic hematopoietic stem cell transplantation (HSCT) has been the only curative option, but it carries substantial risks, including graft-versus-host disease, and requires a matched donor, which is often unavailable. This leaves a significant unmet need for a broadly accessible, curative therapy, especially for children who face a lifetime of complications.

The newly approved gene therapy, exagamglogene autotemcel (exa-cel), targets the genetic root of sickle cell disease. It involves collecting a patient's own hematopoietic stem cells, modifying them ex vivo to increase fetal haemoglobin production, and then reinfusing them after myeloablative conditioning. This approach aims to provide a functional cure by enabling the body to produce red blood cells that resist sickling. The FDA's decision specifically covers patients aged 12 years and older with severe sickle cell disease who have a history of recurrent vaso-occlusive crises (VOCs).

The mechanism and the evidence

Exa-cel works by editing the BCL11A gene in the patient's own stem cells. This editing reactivates the production of fetal haemoglobin (HbF), a form of haemoglobin naturally produced during gestation that does not sickle. Increasing HbF levels dilutes the concentration of sickle haemoglobin (HbS), preventing red blood cells from deforming and blocking blood vessels. The therapy uses CRISPR/Cas9 technology to achieve this precise genetic modification.

Clinical trials, including the CLIMB-111 and CLIMB-121 studies, evaluated the safety and efficacy of exa-cel. These open-label, single-arm studies enrolled patients with severe sickle cell disease. The primary endpoint was freedom from severe vaso-occlusive crises (VOCs) for at least 12 consecutive months after infusion. In CLIMB-111, 36 of 38 patients (94.7%) achieved this primary endpoint, remaining free of severe VOCs for at least one year. The remaining two patients experienced a reduction in severe VOCs of 90% and 75%, respectively. All 38 patients maintained normal or near-normal haemoglobin levels, with a mean total haemoglobin of 13.2 g/dL at 12 months post-infusion.

Patients also showed sustained production of anti-sickling haemoglobin. The mean percentage of fetal haemoglobin (HbF) among total haemoglobin was 39.8% at 12 months, a level sufficient to prevent sickling. This sustained HbF production translated into a dramatic reduction in hospitalisations for VOCs. Before treatment, patients experienced a median of 3.9 severe VOCs per year. After treatment, the median number of severe VOCs was 0 per year, a clinically meaningful outcome for patients and their families.

Safety profile and practical considerations

The safety profile of exa-cel largely reflects the myeloablative conditioning regimen required before stem cell infusion. Common adverse events included mucositis, febrile neutropenia, and other cytopenias, consistent with busulfan conditioning. These events are transient and manageable with supportive care. No cases of graft-versus-host disease occurred, as the therapy uses autologous cells. The long-term safety of gene-edited cells remains an ongoing area of surveillance, but initial data show no unexpected toxicities or clonal abnormalities.

The logistical complexity of gene therapy is an obvious caveat. The process involves apheresis, gene modification in a specialised facility, myeloablative conditioning, and reinfusion, requiring significant coordination and patient support. Access to these highly specialised treatment centres will be a critical determinant of uptake. The cost of gene therapy is also substantial, raising questions about equitable access and healthcare system sustainability. Still, for a disease with such high morbidity and mortality, a functional cure offers immense value.

The FDA's approval of exa-cel for children as young as 12 months represents a significant expansion of treatment options. This younger age group is particularly vulnerable to the early onset of organ damage from sickle cell disease, making early intervention critical. The Oxford Handbook of Paediatrics provides a comprehensive overview of managing such complex conditions in children. The therapy was tested only in patients with severe disease; whether benefits extend to those with less severe phenotypes remains unclear, and further research will be necessary to define the full spectrum of eligible patients.

> **CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS**
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> The approval of exa-cel for paediatric sickle cell disease fundamentally alters the treatment landscape. For the first time, clinicians have a curative option that does not rely on an allogeneic donor, removing a major barrier to access for many children. This means earlier intervention is now a realistic prospect, potentially preventing the irreversible organ damage that accumulates over a lifetime of sickling crises.
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> But the practicalities are formidable. The myeloablative conditioning regimen is not trivial, and the logistical demands of gene therapy mean only highly specialised centres can deliver it. General practitioners and specialists in smaller hospitals will need to understand the referral pathways and the intensive supportive care required post-infusion. This is not a simple prescription; it is a complex, multi-stage medical journey.

> The cost will also be a significant hurdle. While the long-term benefits of a functional cure for sickle cell disease are undeniable, the upfront expense will challenge healthcare systems. Payers will need to weigh the immediate cost against the lifelong burden of managing severe sickle cell disease, including repeated hospitalisations, transfusions, and organ failure treatments. This will inevitably lead to difficult conversations about access and equity.
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> Ultimately, this therapy offers a profound hope for children with severe sickle cell disease. It demands a shift in clinical thinking, moving from chronic disease management to considering a curative strategy early in a patient's life. The challenge now lies in making this complex, expensive, but transformative treatment accessible to those who need it most.