Music Therapy Eases Pain in People with Sickle Cell Disease

Study participants demonstrated better self-efficacy and experienced less pain.

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People with sickle cell disease (SCD) who participated in music therapy were better able to cope with pain and manage their lives, according to a new study from University Hospitals (UH) Connor Whole Health.

Many people with SCD face serious health challenges and may have trouble managing their lives, which can lead to depression. The inherited disorder affects red blood cells, causing the cells to become hard, sticky and C-shaped and get stuck as they travel through small blood vessels, clogging blood flow.

“It feels like someone’s constantly stabbing you, but you’re not dying. You’re just being stabbed over and over for a week or more,” Cleveland resident Tasha Taylor, 40, who lives with SCD, said in a Newswise press release about the study.

Approximately 100,000 Americans have SCD, and the disease occurs among 1 of every 365 African-American births, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Latinos have the second most common incidence of SCD in the United States.

For the past 10 years, UH Connor Whole Health has offered music therapy sessions to hundreds of adults with SCD in both individual and group settings.

“Our most widely used integrative approach has been the use of music therapy to assist with pain management, quality of life and the transition from pediatric to adult care for individuals with sickle cell disease,” said Samuel Rodgers-Melnick, a music therapist and integrative health research and data specialist with UH Connor who has conducted research on the use of music therapy for those with SCD.

The study examined the benefits of a six-part music therapy intervention among adults with SCD who experienced chronic pain. Some people experienced in-person music therapy sessions paired with exercises like music-based breathing, muscle relaxation, imagery and active music making, according to the press release. Participants in the control group did not receive these therapies. All participants completed daily virtual pain diaries and quality-of-life measures before and after the

intervention period.

Results showed high rates of enrollment, attendance and completion. Compared with the control group, participants in music therapy found that their pain and sleep disturbance decreased and their social functioning and life management improved.

“The findings from this latest study show that patients with SCD are willing to participate in music therapy, whether in the hospital setting or at home, and when they do, it helps their pain and improves their quality of life,” Rodgers-Melnick told Newswise. “This is what we want for our patients, and this is why we’re so passionate about sharing the successes of addressing pain with music therapy.”

If you want to learn more about music therapy, read “Music Therapy May Benefit Patients After a Heart Attack.”

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