

Cirrhosis and Liver Damage

What is cirrhosis?

It is permanent scarring of the liver.

What causes it?

Hepatitis and drinking too much alcohol are the most common causes. A fatty diet, certain medicines, and even your own immune system can also damage your liver.

What does my liver do?

Your liver helps you digest your food. It also removes toxins from your blood and makes important proteins that your body needs, such as proteins to help your blood clot.

Can my liver recover?

Depending on how badly your liver is damaged, it may be able to partially recover. If your liver can't recover, your doctor can refer you to a transplant center.

How do I find out if I have cirrhosis?

Your doctor will do blood tests and a physical exam. Sometimes an ultrasound is used to take a picture of your liver. Your doctor also may take a small sample of your liver to examine; this is called a biopsy.

What kind of problems does cirrhosis cause?

Your skin can turn yellow and you can have swelling around your waist and legs. Some patients also get swollen veins. You can throw up blood, or have blood in your stool. Throwing up a lot of blood or having a lot of blood in your stool is a medical emergency, and you should seek medical attention right away.

Some patients can develop confusion, which can lead to coma. Confusion can be managed with medicines, but patients with confusion should not drive.

Sometimes the same problems that lead to cirrhosis also increase your risk of liver cancer, so your doctor will need to screen you for cancer.

Where can I get more information?

American Liver Foundation

Web site: <http://www.liverfoundation.org>

Telephone: 1-800-GO-LIVER (1-800-465-4837)

eMedicineHealth

Web site: http://www.emedicinehealth.com/cirrhosis/article_em.htm

National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse

Web site: <http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/cirrhosis/>

Telephone: 1-800-891-5389

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This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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