

Alcohol-Related Liver Disease



Why your liver is important

Your liver has around 500 different tasks to perform to help keep your body working at its best. Its two most important roles are cleaning your blood and aiding digestion by breaking down fat and sugar for your body to use as energy. A healthy liver helps fight infection and remove harmful toxins from your body. A damaged liver cannot carry out these jobs properly so it is important to keep your liver healthy.

Facts about the liver: It is the largest internal organ. It is located on the right-hand side of your body, behind your ribs. It can repair itself and create new, healthy liver tissue. It breaks down and absorbs fats in the body. There are 1.5 litres of blood flowing through your liver every minute.

What is Alcohol-Related Liver Disease?

Alcohol-Related Liver Disease occurs when the liver is affected by excessive drinking of alcohol. It can result in a range of changes to the liver, from Fatty Liver Disease (steatosis) to hepatitis (inflammation) or cirrhosis (scarring).

The most common liver disease caused by drinking too much alcohol is Fatty Liver Disease, caused by a build-up of fats in liver cells that can gradually damage the organ and lead to serious complications such as hepatitis, cirrhosis and even liver cancer or failure. Fatty Liver Disease may go undetected and undiagnosed for many years and not everyone who drinks alcohol will develop a liver disease. But the good news is that if Alcohol-Related Liver Disease is diagnosed early by your doctor early, it can often be reversed.

What causes Alcohol-Related Liver Disease?

Alcohol-Related Liver Disease is caused by drinking an excessive amount of alcohol, usually over a long period of time. This can be in the form of binge drinking or drinking excessive amounts regularly. It is a common, but preventable, disease.

Alcohol-Related Liver Disease falls into three main categories:

Stage one: Fatty Liver (steatosis). This is the earliest and most common form of liver disease caused by excessive alcohol consumption. The build-up of fats in liver cells makes it hard for the liver to function. The good news is that the condition usually goes away if you stop drinking alcohol.

Stage two: Alcoholic hepatitis. This occurs when liver cells have been destroyed and the liver becomes inflamed and swollen. Symptoms can include fever, jaundice, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain and tenderness. Mild alcoholic hepatitis can continue for years and gradually damage your liver, but still may be reversible. The more severe form can appear suddenly, often after a drinking binge, and can have serious complications.

Stage three: Alcohol-related cirrhosis. This is the most severe form of Alcohol-Related Liver Disease as the normal liver tissue is replaced with scar tissue and becomes hard and ineffective. Symptoms include accumulation of fluid in the abdomen (ascites), high blood pressure in the liver, bleeding from veins in the oesophagus, behaviour change and confusion, and enlarged spleen.

Am I at risk?

For most people, drinking moderate amounts of alcohol will not lead to Alcohol-Related Liver Disease. However, if you have chronic liver disease (a condition lasting more than six months) even small amounts of alcohol can make your liver worse. **People with Alcohol-Related Liver Disease, and those with cirrhosis from any cause, should not drink alcohol at all.**

The more you drink over time increases the risk, but not everyone who drinks will develop disease.

Other factors which may contribute include:

Obesity. This is an important risk factor in Fatty Liver Disease which is made worse if combined with too much alcohol

Malnutrition. Many heavy drinkers may lose their appetite or feel nauseous as the liver finds it increasingly difficult to break down alcohol and absorb nutrients, which in turn contribute to liver cell damage

Genetic factors. Our genes may affect how our body processes alcohol and predispose us to Alcohol-Related Liver Disease

Gender. Women are more susceptible to the adverse effects of alcohol because they are generally smaller than men

Chronic viral hepatitis. Excessive alcohol drinking creates additional risk of disease progression

How much can I drink?

No two people are the same, so consult with your health practitioner about how much you can drink.

The Australian Alcohol Guidelines recommend **not drinking more than 2 standard drinks a day and no more than 4 over several hours.**

If your liver is already damaged you should limit your alcohol intake or not drink at all.

What to do in a social setting if you are not drinking?

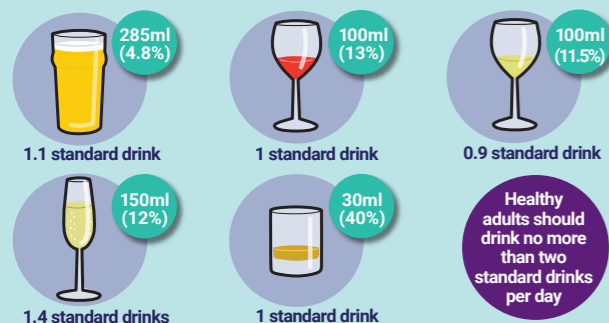
Consider non-alcoholic drinks such as 'mocktails' but watch out for too much sugar as that will impact your liver health.

What is a standard drink?

The Australian Alcohol Guidelines* state that one standard drink refers to 10 grams of alcohol which is equivalent to 12.5 ml of pure alcohol, or the amount the average person can process in one hour. This varies depending on your weight, age, gender and physical state.

When buying alcohol, the number of standard drinks is always shown on the label. If you are drinking by the glass from a licensed venue, check with the server as glass sizes can greatly differ.

The guide below offers a brief summary of what constitutes a standard drink but check DrinkWise.org.au for a more comprehensive list.



* The Australian Government, Department of Health

www.alcohol.gov.au/internet/alcohol/publishing.nsf/Content/standard

Stages of liver disease

There are more than 100 liver diseases affecting men, women and children. No matter the type, damage to your liver progresses in a similar way. The good news is that if liver disease is identified early, treatment can be very effective. If left untreated, your liver will worsen.



Fatty Liver:

An accumulation of fat in the liver cells can occur over many years, without obvious symptoms or pain. Regular blood tests can identify Fatty Liver Disease early and be reversed.



Inflammation:

An inflamed (swollen) liver is caused by too much alcohol, viral infection, problems with your immune system or toxins. Treatment can help the inflammation go away. If it is alcohol-related, the first step is to cease drinking alcohol completely.



Fibrosis:

If an inflamed liver is not treated, healthy soft tissue will begin to scar and harden. With treatment, fibrosis (scarring) can heal.



Cirrhosis:

A liver with cirrhosis is full of hard scarred tissue. Treatment can stop the condition from getting worse, protect any healthy tissue, and sometimes even improve liver function.



Liver Cancer:

Risk of liver cancer is higher if you have an existing liver disease such as cirrhosis. Cancer can be managed if found early.



Liver Failure:

Liver failure is when the liver stops functioning. This is a very serious condition that needs urgent medical care. A liver transplant might be an option.

Treatment for Alcohol-Related Liver Disease

Decreasing the amount of alcohol you drink, or abstaining totally, will usually help reverse early signs of Alcohol-Related Liver Disease and is vital for improving more serious conditions.

Steps you can take to help prevent and reverse some of the damage caused by Alcohol-Related Liver Disease:

- Consult your doctor to help manage your alcohol consumption
- Eat a well-balanced, nutritious diet low in salt to reduce the risk of developing swollen legs and stomach. Your doctor or dietician can suggest a suitable diet and exercise plan
- Only take medications or drugs prescribed by your doctor.

Talking about your concerns

Talk about any concerns with your doctor. If you need treatment, they will recommend appropriate actions and monitor your progress. In the early stages of Alcohol-Related Liver Disease, Medicare covers the cost of testing so ensure you take the first step to find out how your liver is functioning. Your doctor can also refer you to liver specialists.

An up-to-date directory on liver clinics and liver specialists is listed on the Hepatitis Victoria website.

Talk to friends and family for practical and emotional support and discuss any concerns with health providers – including nurses, counsellors, therapists, pharmacists, hepatologists, gastroenterologists, dieticians and nutritionists.

For general information and support, you can also call the Hepatitis Victoria Infoline on 1800 703 003.

Keeping your liver healthy

Most of us with Alcohol-Related Liver Disease can improve our health through simple and sustained lifestyle measures such as not drinking alcohol, adopting a low-fat, low-sugar, low-calorie diet, smaller food portions and increased exercise.

The free LiverWELL app developed by Hepatitis Victoria has lots of tips on how to keep your liver healthy:



eating well: cut back on foods that are high in fat and sugar



getting active: try some exercise everyday



feeling well: take care of yourself emotionally, spiritually and physically



drink aware: do not drink alcohol

For information and practical tips on managing your liver health, visit: www.liverwell.org.au or download the LiverWELL app

LiverWELL®



Finding support

Websites

www.liverwell.org.au

www.loveyourliver.com.au

www.quit.org.au

www.hepvic.org.au

www.cancervic.org.au

www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

HEPATITIS VICTORIA

www.hepvic.org.au

info@hepvic.org.au

Hepatitis Infoline: 1800 703 003

Produced by Hepatitis Victoria. This information is general in nature and not intended as medical advice. Consult your doctor for further information.