

Cirrhosis

Understanding your liver



Why your liver is important

Just about everything you eat and everything you drink goes through your liver. Even chemicals that touch your skin and toxins that you breathe in pass through your liver.

Your liver has around 500 different jobs that keep your body working at its best. The two most important jobs are cleaning your blood and helping with digestion. A healthy liver also helps with energy, fights infection, and gets rid of harmful toxins. But a damaged liver can't do these jobs properly. So it's vital to keep your liver healthy.

Liver facts

- largest internal organ
- on the right-hand side of your torso, behind your ribs
- can repair itself and create new healthy liver tissue
- is the key to breaking down and absorbing fats in the body
- 1.5 litres of blood flows through your liver every minute

What is cirrhosis?

If your liver is damaged and left untreated, over time it can lead to cirrhosis (say *si'rohshs*). Damage begins when healthy living cells become inflamed (swollen) from viral infection, too much alcohol, problems with your immune system or harmful toxins. If the inflammation is left untreated some cells die, making the liver lumpy, scarred and stiff (fibrosis) eventually leading to cirrhosis. At this stage, with too many lumpy scarred cells, it's hard for blood to flow through the liver. Without good blood flow the liver can't do its job properly.

Am I at risk?

If you have an inflamed liver and do not get treatment, you are at risk of developing cirrhosis.

You are at risk if you:

- are overweight or obese and have a fatty liver
- drink too much alcohol
- have a liver infection, such as hepatitis B or hepatitis C, that has not been diagnosed and is not treated
- have a problem with your immune system that leads to liver disease
- are born with liver disease.

If you are concerned talk to your doctor. To learn more about liver health see the online resources at www.liverwell.org.au

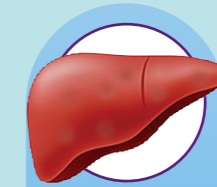
Do I have cirrhosis?

To find out if you have cirrhosis, talk to your doctor. Your doctor will ask for information about your medical history, do a physical examination, and order tests (most are covered by Medicare) that measure how well your liver is working:

- **blood tests:** measure liver function; results help your doctor choose other tests to run
- **ultrasound:** builds a digital picture of your liver
- **fibroscan:** a specialised ultrasound that measures scarring on your liver
- **MRI and CT scans:** provide a detailed view of your internal organs
- **liver biopsy:** a tiny needle sample of your liver is taken and examined (local anaesthetic)
- **endoscopy:** a thin tube with a tiny camera on the end (endoscope) is passed down your throat and into your stomach to check for bleeding in your stomach (light sedation).

Stages of liver disease

There are many different types of liver disease. No matter what type you have, the damage to your liver progresses in a similar way. The good news is that if liver disease is caught early, treatment can be very effective. But if left untreated, your liver will get worse.



Inflammation

An inflamed (swollen) liver is caused by viral infection, too much alcohol, problems with your immune system or toxins. Treatment can help the inflammation go away.



Fibrosis

If an inflamed liver is not treated, the healthy soft tissue will begin to scar and harden. With treatment the 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

The 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.

Two stages of cirrhosis

Compensated cirrhosis

Your liver has enough healthy cells and good blood flow to keep doing its job. Your liver still works well enough to compensate (make up) for the scarred cells. You will have only mild symptoms or none at all. You can prevent further damage by treating the cause. Some symptoms include:

- generally feeling unwell and tired all the time
- tenderness or pain in the liver area
- itchiness over the whole body, especially at night
- jaundice (yellow skin and eyes)
- blotchy red palms
- spider veins on upper body
- unusual or persistent darkening of the urine
- brain fog or feeling a bit vague.

Decompensated cirrhosis

Your liver is severely scarred, shrunken and hard and can't carry out important jobs such as clearing toxins from your blood. The damage is life threatening but can still be reversed. You will have serious symptoms, including the following:

- bleeding varices (say 'varuhseez'): enlarged veins in the oesophagus that lead to vomiting blood and black sticky stools (poo)
- ascites (say uh'suyteez): a build-up of fluid in your stomach that leads to swelling of the stomach and shortness of breath
- encephalopathy (say ensefuh'lopuhthee): a build-up of toxins that affect your ability to think clearly, create changes in mood or personality and, in severe cases, loss of consciousness.

If you have any of these symptoms see a doctor immediately.

Early treatment can help

The good news is that treatment at the early stage of liver damage can help. But if left untreated, your liver will get worse. See your doctor if are concerned.

Treatment

Treatment can help stop liver damage from getting worse. In some cases, treatment can even improve your liver function.

Avoid drinking alcohol

Avoid alcohol. If your cirrhosis is not the result of heavy drinking, you still need to limit how much alcohol you drink or try to stop altogether. Alcohol puts stress on your liver. If you keep drinking, the damage to your liver will get worse and the risk of developing liver cancer will increase. For more information go to: www.liverwell.org.au/drinkaware

Reduce fat build-up in the liver

Talk to a dietician to learn more about how to change your diet, lose weight and become more active. For more information go to: www.liverwell.org.au/eatingwell

Treat hepatitis B

Take anti-viral tablets prescribed by your doctor. They are simple and safe. Your doctor will oversee the treatment and monitor your liver health.

Treat hepatitis C

You can be free of hepatitis C. Take tablets every day for 8-12 weeks with very few side effects and a 95% success rate. Talk to your doctor about how to start treatment.

Treat autoimmune and genetic disorders

Autoimmune diseases are treated with steroid-based drugs. Genetic liver diseases are managed with very specialised treatment.

Tobacco and other harmful toxins

A healthy liver can get rid of harmful toxins but a liver with cirrhosis can't. Toxins include smoke from tobacco, marijuana and vaping; prescription and non-prescription drugs; and recreational drugs.

Medications



Take prescribed medications and speak to your doctor if you have any side effects or need to increase the dose.



Talk to your doctor before taking over-the-counter pain medications, sedative drugs, vitamin supplements, or herbal and alternative therapies.



Do not take aspirin or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen or diclofenac. Talk to your doctor if you need treatment for pain.

Keeping your liver healthy

The 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 high in sugar



getting active: do some exercise everyday



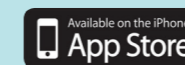
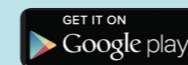
feeling well: take care of yourself emotionally, spiritually and physically



drink aware: cut back on how much alcohol you drink or try to stop altogether

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

LiverWELL



Talking about your concerns

If you are concerned, talk to your doctor who can run tests to measure how your liver is working. If you need treatment, your doctor will prescribe medication to help your liver and will monitor your progress. Medicare covers the cost so treatment is not expensive.

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.

Try talking to friends and family for practical and emotional support. You can also talk to health providers – including nurses, counsellors, therapists, pharmacists, dieticians and nutritionists. For general information and support you can also call the Hepatitis Victoria Infoline: 1800 703 003.

Hepatitis Infoline

Free and anonymous. Trained professionals listen to your concerns and provide further information. Call **1800 703 003**

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

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