

# Alcohol and Liver Disease

Drinking too much alcohol can lead to three types of liver conditions - fatty liver, hepatitis, and cirrhosis. For all types of liver disease caused by alcohol, the main treatment is to stop drinking completely.

## What does the liver do?

The liver is in the upper right part of the abdomen. It has many functions which include:

- Storing glycogen, a chemical made from sugars. When required, glycogen is broken down into glucose which is released into the bloodstream.
- Helping to process fats and proteins from digested food.
- Making proteins that are essential for blood to clot (clotting factors).
- Processing many medicines which you may take.
- Helping to remove or process alcohol, poisons and toxins from the body.
- Making bile which passes from the liver to the gut and helps to digest fats.

## What happens when you drink alcohol?

When you drink alcohol, it is absorbed into the bloodstream from the stomach and intestines. All blood from the stomach and intestines first goes through the liver before circulating around the whole body. So, the highest concentration of alcohol is in the blood flowing through the liver. Enzymes in the liver cells break down alcohol. The liver cells can break down only a certain amount of alcohol per hour. So, if you drink alcohol faster than your liver can deal with it, the level of alcohol in your bloodstream rises.

## What are the problems of drinking too much alcohol?

Your liver and body can usually cope with drinking a small amount of alcohol. However, drinking over the recommended limits (detailed below) can be harmful. If you drink heavily you have an increased risk of developing:

- Serious liver problems (alcoholic liver disease).
- Some stomach disorders.
- Pancreatitis (severe inflammation of the pancreas).
- Mental health problems including depression and anxiety.
- Sexual difficulties such as impotence.
- Muscle and heart muscle disease.
- High blood pressure.
- Accidents - drinking alcohol is associated with a much increased risk of accidents. In particular, injury and death from fire and car crashes.
- Some cancers (mouth, liver, colon and breast).
- Obesity (alcohol has many calories).
- Damage to an unborn baby in pregnant women.
- Alcohol dependence (addiction).

## What is alcoholic liver disease?

Drinking too much alcohol can lead to three types of liver conditions - fatty liver, hepatitis, and cirrhosis. Any, or all, of these conditions can occur at the same time in the same person.

## **Fatty liver**

A build-up of fat occurs within liver cells in most people who regularly drink heavily. Fatty liver will usually reverse if you stop drinking heavily. However, in some people the fatty liver progresses and develops into hepatitis or cirrhosis.

## **Alcoholic hepatitis**

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. The inflammation can range from mild to severe.

## **Alcoholic cirrhosis**

Cirrhosis is a condition where normal liver tissue is replaced by scar tissue (fibrosis). The scarring tends to be a gradual process and affects the liver cells. Liver cells become damaged and die as scar tissue gradually develops. Cirrhosis can happen from many causes other than alcohol, for example, persistent viral hepatitis (hepatitis B and/or C) and some hereditary and metabolic diseases. If a person has another persistent liver disease, and drinks heavily, the risk of developing cirrhosis is increased. In the early stages of the condition, often there are no symptoms. But, as more and more liver cells die, symptoms start to appear. Cirrhosis can lead to end-stage liver disease.

## **How is alcoholic liver disease diagnosed?**

A doctor may suspect that you have liver problems from your symptoms, a through history and physical examination. Some tests may be done including blood tests, an ultrasound, and/or even a biopsy of the liver.

## **What is the treatment for alcoholic liver disease?**

For all types of liver disease caused by alcohol, a person should stop drinking completely. A healthy diet would be recommended, and vitamin supplements may be prescribed for a while.

## **Do you need help to stop drinking?**

Help and treatment is available if you find that you cannot stop drinking. If you feel that you, or a relative or friend, needs help stopping alcohol, then see your doctor.

### Patient and family/friend resources :

- **New Jersey Addiction Services Hotline** : Offers help to callers worried about their own drinking and support to the family and friends of people who are drinking. Advice to callers on where to go for help : [In NJ dial 211](#)
- **Alcoholics Anonymous** : Offers support to those who want to stop drinking. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking : [www.aa.org/](http://www.aa.org/)
- **NJ Division of Addiction Services** : For information and resources about alcohol and substance abuse in New Jersey : [www.state.nj.us/humanservices/das/home/index.html](http://www.state.nj.us/humanservices/das/home/index.html)
- **Al-Alon** : Support for families and friends of alcoholics whether the drinker is still drinking or not : [www.al-anon.alateen.org/](http://www.al-anon.alateen.org/)

Sources : [www.patient.co.uk](http://www.patient.co.uk)  
[www.bupa.co.uk/individuals/health-information](http://www.bupa.co.uk/individuals/health-information)

Disclaimer: This article is for information only and should not be used for the diagnosis or treatment of medical conditions. Consult a doctor or other health care professional for diagnosis and treatment of medical conditions.