

MANAGING YOUR ALCOHOLIC HEPATITIS

What Is Alcoholic Hepatitis?

Alcoholic hepatitis is inflammation (swelling and irritation) of the liver. It is treatable, but for any treatment to work, drinking alcohol must stop. With continued drinking, alcoholic hepatitis can progress to cirrhosis of the liver. Cirrhosis is an illness that can't be cured. In cirrhosis, normal liver tissue is destroyed and replaced by scar tissue. In time, the liver stops working.

The disease most often affects people older than 30.

What Causes Alcoholic Hepatitis?

Alcoholic hepatitis is caused by drinking too much alcohol for a long time.

What Are the Symptoms of Alcoholic Hepatitis?

Symptoms may not appear until damage to the liver is severe.

Symptoms are similar to those of viral hepatitis. The first symptom may be a flu-like feeling. People who drink alcohol may also be malnourished.

As the disease progresses, later symptoms include yellowish skin and whites of the eyes (jaundice); pale or clay-colored stools; dark urine; general itching; high temperature; swelling of the abdomen (belly) caused by fluid; painful, tender, and enlarged liver; mental confusion; and possible coma.

How Is Alcoholic Hepatitis Diagnosed?

The health care provider may suspect the disease because of a history of drinking too much alcohol, abnormal blood tests suggesting inflammation of the liver, and an abnormal physical examination that shows an enlarged liver. To confirm the diagnosis, the health care provider may

in rare cases recommend a liver biopsy. For a biopsy, the doctor inserts a hollow needle through the skin and takes out a tiny piece of liver tissue for study in the laboratory.

How Is Alcoholic Hepatitis Treated?

Treatment of hepatitis is supportive, meaning that the goal is to improve the person's overall health and increase strength. The key is to stop drinking alcohol. An alcohol rehabilitation program can offer important help with this. Malnourishment is improved by following a good diet, one that is high in carbohydrates and calories. Intravenous feedings may be needed in people with extremely poor nutritional status. Eating less salt (sodium) may also be important to prevent abdominal swelling. Vitamin supplements are also needed, especially vitamin B and folic acid. It may take the liver weeks to months to heal.

DOs and DON'Ts in Managing Alcoholic Hepatitis

- ✓ **DO** stop drinking.
- ✓ **DO** seek treatment for your alcohol problem.
- ✓ **DO** eat a well-balanced, high-calorie diet. People who drink too much alcohol are often malnourished.
- ✓ **DO** take vitamins, especially vitamin B and folic acid.
- ✓ **DO** change your activity according to your symptoms. A good fitness program may help with fatigue.
- ✓ **DO** call your health care provider if you develop symptoms suggesting alcoholic hepatitis.

- ✓ **DO** call your health care provider if you develop symptoms after prolonged or heavy drinking.
- ⊗ **DON'T** drink alcohol. You could get cirrhosis of the liver.
- ⊗ **DON'T** salt your food. Eating salt can make swelling of the abdomen worse.
- ⊗ **DON'T** use drugs, including acetaminophen, sedatives, and tranquilizers, that can harm the liver.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact the following sources:

- Alcoholics Anonymous: Tel: (212) 870-3400; Website: <http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org>
- American Liver Foundation: Tel: (800) GOLIVER (465-4837); E-mail: webmail@liverfoundation.org; Website: <http://www.liverfoundation.org>

- National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism: Tel: (301) 443-3860; Website:
<http://www.niaaa.nih.gov>

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