

2014

# Alcoholic Hepatitis

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## What is alcoholic hepatitis?

Alcoholic hepatitis is the inflammation (swelling) of liver cells caused by drinking alcohol. Your liver processes everything you eat and drink. When alcohol reaches your liver, ethanol is broken down and makes highly toxic substances. These substances can damage your liver cells causing inflammation, which leads to cell death.

## How do you get alcoholic hepatitis?

It's hard to predict who will get alcoholic hepatitis. It is not clear why some non-drinkers get the disease and yet not all heavy drinkers do. However, continuous drinking forces your liver to continually regenerate (grow back) to replace the cells that get destroyed. The more you drink, the more at risk you may be for getting alcoholic hepatitis.

If you have any questions, please ask.

We are here to help you.

## **What is a safe amount of alcohol I can have?**

Having a safe amount of alcohol depends on many things including your body weight, and whether you are male or female. The recommended maximum amount from The Canadian Liver Foundation is 2 drinks per day. If you have liver disease and/or liver cirrhosis, you should stop drinking alcohol completely.

The amount of 1 drink varies with the different types of alcohol:

- › 12 oz. (341 mL) beer
- › 5 oz. (142 mL) wine
- › 3 oz. (86 mL) sherry or port
- › 1 ½ oz. (43 mL) spirits

## **What are the symptoms of alcoholic hepatitis?**

Without your liver working properly, your body will not absorb (take in) the right amount of nutrients. This causes yellowing of your skin and eyes (jaundice). You may have:

- › Loss of appetite
- › Nausea (feeling sick to your stomach)
- › Vomiting (throwing up)
- › Weight loss
- › Abdominal (stomach) pain

In bad cases, alcoholic hepatitis can cause your waist to get bigger because your body will retain (hold onto) large amounts of liquids in your abdominal cavity (ascites).

You may have confusion and experience behavioural changes because of the increased toxins that have built up in your brain. There may also be liver and kidney failure.

### **Can the damage to my liver be reversed?**

The liver can regenerate itself, so if there isn't a lot of damage, there should be a chance of full recovery. However, this would require having no alcohol in the body.

Your liver may not regenerate if there is a lot of damage. Fatty liver disease and mild alcoholic hepatitis can be cured.

Severe (bad) alcoholic hepatitis can lead to cirrhosis, which is when permanent scar tissue replaces the healthy cells in the liver. This scar tissue cannot deal with nutrients, hormones, and other substances as quickly. Cirrhosis is irreversible (can't be undone).

## **How is alcoholic hepatitis diagnosed?**

Alcoholic hepatitis is diagnosed as a combination of 2 factors: evidence of excessive (too much) drinking and evidence of liver disease. Your doctor will want to know about the history of your drinking habits. It is important to be honest in describing this history in order for your doctor to come up with the right diagnosis.

To find out if you have liver disease, your doctor will do the following tests:

- › Liver function
- › Complete blood cell count
- › Ultrasound
- › CT or MRI scan of the liver
- › Blood tests to rule out other causes of liver disease

Together, these tests may lead to a diagnosis of alcoholic hepatitis.

## **What are the treatments for alcoholic hepatitis?**

**You must stop drinking alcohol as soon as possible.**

It is the only way to possibly reverse the effects of alcoholic hepatitis or to prevent the disease from getting worse.

Your doctor may recommend a change in diet as you may have malnutrition as your liver cannot process food properly. A dietitian will work with you to help you have a healthy diet.



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