

2. LIVER CANCER:

Cirrhosis can lead to liver cancer (also called hepatocellular carcinoma, hepatoma or HCC). This risk is low – around two percent chance each year. Unlike liver failure, liver cancer does not cause any symptoms or signs until it is very large. At this stage it is not curable. The time of the onset of liver cancer until it causes symptoms is usually 2-3 years.

For this reason, every person with cirrhosis should have regular screening with an ultrasound and blood test so if they do develop a liver cancer, it can be detected when it's still small and curable.

IS TREATMENT AVAILABLE?

In all patients with chronic hepatitis B, safe and effective medications (one tablet per day) are available and fully funded. These medications will prevent cirrhosis. They will also prevent liver failure and liver cancer when started in patients who already have cirrhosis. Two-thirds of people with chronic hepatitis C can be cured with current treatment. This treatment is pegylated interferon and ribavirin. Triple therapy is available for people who meet the criteria. Treatment lengths vary between 24 and 48 weeks. Living a healthy lifestyle and being cured of hepatitis C will prevent further liver damage.

For more information visit
www.hepatitisfoundation.org.nz



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Cirrhosis and chronic hepatitis

Cirrhosis is scarring
of the liver



Know it. Test it. Treat it.

WHAT IS CIRRHOSIS?

Chronic hepatitis can cause cirrhosis of the liver. Cirrhosis is a result of advanced scarring of the liver that results from persistent injury to the liver, usually from a chronic viral infection (especially chronic hepatitis B and chronic hepatitis C, but also from alcohol or too much fat). This scarring is a slow process. It takes 20-40 years from the onset of liver disease for cirrhosis to develop. This scar tissue reduces the blood flow through the liver, causing increase in pressure in the veins which may cause bleeding in the gullet and stomach. Cirrhosis can also lead to liver failure or liver cancer (see below).

WHY IS THE LIVER IMPORTANT?

The liver is an extremely important organ in the body that has many functions essential for life and growth. These include:

- Converting food into glucose (the body's energy), proteins (which build muscle, prevent infection and stop bleeding) and fats (essential to help our cells remain healthy)
- Filtering alcohol and other toxic substances and excreting these from the body
- Helping activate medications so they work properly, and then breaking them down and removing them from the body.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Symptoms of cirrhosis may include a loss of appetite, extreme tiredness, nausea, abdominal swelling and the inability to tolerate fatty foods.

WHAT ARE THE STAGES OF CIRRHOSIS?

There are two main stages of cirrhosis.

EARLY STAGES	LATER STAGES
The liver function is normal – this is called compensated cirrhosis. However, bleeding complications can still occur.	The liver function is abnormal and signs of liver failure will develop. This is called decompensated cirrhosis. Often the onset of decompensated cirrhosis is due to a sudden event such as an infection, bleeding, or a new medication. With treatment, the liver function may return to a compensated state.

WHAT CAUSES CIRRHOSIS TO PROGRESS?

Cirrhosis is the end-stage of many types of chronic liver disease, the most common being chronic viral hepatitis, alcohol abuse, and fatty liver (from obesity or diabetes). People who contract hepatitis B at birth or early childhood may become cirrhotic in their early 30s, while people infected with hepatitis C in their 20s are unlikely to become cirrhotic until their late 40s. However, there are several common lifestyle factors that can speed up this process no matter what type of liver disease you have. Heavy alcohol (>2 standard drinks per day), heavy cannabis use (>2 joints per day) and being overweight all increase the progression to cirrhosis. By avoiding these three lifestyle factors you can reduce your risk of developing cirrhosis by more than 90 percent.

WHAT ARE THE COMPLICATIONS?

1. LIVER FAILURE:

In a patient with compensated cirrhosis, progression of the liver disease may lead to deterioration of liver function and the onset of liver failure (decompensated cirrhosis):

SYMPTOMS AND SIGNS OF LIVER FAILURE INCLUDE:

- Increased tiredness and inability to carry out your usual activities
- Build-up of fluid in the feet and lower legs (oedema)
- Build-up of fluid in the abdomen (ascites)
- Bruising and bleeding (because of low numbers of platelets and lack of clotting proteins in the blood)
- Difficulty sleeping at night but sleeping during the day, followed by loss of mental sharpness and eventually onset of confusion (encephalopathy). Usually these changes are noticed first by your friends and family
- Yellowing of the whites of the eyes and skin and darkening of the urine (jaundice)
- Black bowel motions or vomiting blood, from bleeding into the bowel from varicose veins in gullet and stomach
- Loss of muscle bulk, especially around the shoulders and neck (protein-calorie malnutrition).