

Common Gastrointestinal Problems

A Consumer Health Guide

Important Information for Patients with Chronic Liver Disease and/or Cirrhosis

Introduction

Patients who suffer from chronic liver disease may develop cirrhosis after years of disease. Cirrhosis of the liver is a serious condition characterized by severe scarring. Not everyone with hepatitis or liver disease develops cirrhosis. If your doctor has told you that you have chronic liver disease and/or cirrhosis, there are important precautions that you should take to prevent further damage to your liver.

Can I drink alcohol?

No, you should not drink alcohol.

Alcohol damages liver cells. A healthy liver is able to replace most liver cells that are injured by alcohol. However, in individuals with cirrhosis, the liver is unable to replace the damaged liver cells. Drinking any alcohol, not just hard liquor, but also beer or wine will speed up the process of liver destruction and may counteract any treatments prescribed by your doctor.

Is it safe to take acetaminophen (Tylenol®)?

It is generally safe to take acetaminophen in the amount specified in the labeling. Acetaminophen is the main ingredient in Tylenol®, but it is also found in many non-prescription products for headaches, the flu, sinus problems, arthritis or general aches and pains. In 1993, an FDA Advisory Committee recommended that all over-the-counter pain relievers contain an alcohol warning. Tylenol® and some other pain relievers have included such an alcohol warning on their labeling. But, to date, not all over-the-counter pain relief products have complied with the FDA recommendation. There have been some reports that chronic heavy alcohol users may be at increased risk of liver toxicity from excessive acetaminophen use. Individuals who have been diagnosed with liver conditions will want to consult with their physician for advice on when and how to take pain relievers and should not exceed recommended doses of acetaminophen or any other pain reliever,

especially if they are consuming alcohol. Pay particular attention to products labeled “aspirin-free”; some prescription medications also contain acetaminophen, so be sure to ask your doctor about use of pain relievers.

Some Acetaminophen Containing Medicines

Tylenol®	325 mg/tablet
Tylenol Extra Strength®	500 mg/tablet
Tylenol Adult Liquid®	500 mg/tablespoon
Tylenol Extended Relief®	650 mg/tablet
Aspirin Free Excedrin®	500 mg/tablet
Excedrin Extra-Strength®	250 mg/tablet
Excedrin P.M.®	500 mg/tablet
Midrin®	325 mg/capsule
Actifed Cold & Sinus®	500 mg/tablet
Sinutab Sinus Allergy®	500 mg/tablet
Sudafed Cold & Cough®	500 mg/tablet

What other medications should I avoid?

You may need to avoid iron supplements.

Too much iron can damage liver cells or aggravate liver damage caused by some viruses. Most adults do not need to take iron supplements unless there is a history of obvious blood loss or a known deficiency of iron. Unless your doctor prescribes iron supplements for you, do not take any iron supplements or even multivitamins that contain iron.

What foods should I avoid?

Sewage runoff can infect edible sea organisms (clams, oysters, crustaceans and fish) with both bacteria and viruses. Contamination of seafood may be undetectable by smell or taste. Clams and oysters are especially susceptible to sewage contamination and should never be eaten raw.

Vibrio vulnificus is a bacteria that is found in contaminated oysters and other seafood. In healthy people, it rarely causes serious infection, but in individuals with cirrhosis it can cause death in 48 to 72 hours.

What Everyone Should Know About Chronic Liver Disease and/or Cirrhosis

Hepatitis A is a virus that can be found in clams and oysters. Infection with hepatitis A can cause even healthy persons to become very sick. Individuals with cirrhosis are especially vulnerable to a life-threatening infection caused by this virus.

If you have open sores on your skin, you should avoid exposure to sea water during the warm summer months. Harmful organisms can enter the blood stream through these sores and cause serious infection.

Are vaccines important?

Yes! Ask your doctor if you would benefit from one or more of the following vaccines:

Hepatitis A Vaccine:

Used to prevent hepatitis A, which can be severe in individuals with cirrhosis. It consists of a series of two injections given six months apart.

Hepatitis B Vaccine:

Used to prevent hepatitis B, another type of viral hepatitis. It consists of a series of three injections. The second and third injections are given one and six months after the initial injection.

Pneumococcal vaccine:

Used to prevent a kind of pneumonia caused by a bacteria called *Streptococcus pneumoniae*. It consists of only one injection, and should be repeated in five years.

Flu Shot:

Used to prevent influenza, a cause of severe upper respiratory infection and pneumonia. It is a single injection given yearly, usually in the Fall, just prior to the flu season.

Are there any natural herbs that can heal my liver?

Many causes of cirrhosis do not have any treatment available. For this reason, many individuals resort to the use of "health foods" and "natural herbs or supplements" to improve the liver. There is no scientific proof that any of these products are of benefit to the liver. Most of them are safe, but liver damage caused by herbal products has been

reported. There are several herbal remedies that are known to cause liver damage. Be sure to tell your doctor before you begin any herbal products so that he or she may better monitor your condition.

Remember, take care of yourself.

Although cirrhosis is a serious condition, you may live many years without problems. Try to eat a well-balanced diet and exercise regularly. The more active you become in taking care of yourself and obtaining regular follow-up with your doctor, the more likely you will be one of the many individuals that do well for many years.

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