

Alcohol-related liver disease

What is alcohol-related liver disease?

Alcohol-related liver disease is a condition where the liver has been damaged by alcohol. You don't have to be addicted to alcohol to develop the condition, regularly drinking over the guideline amounts can put you at risk. It's sometimes referred to as alcoholic liver disease, and your doctor might use the abbreviations ALD or ARLD when they're talking about it.

There are several stages of alcohol-related liver disease. Cirrhosis, the most serious stage of liver disease, usually takes many years to develop.

Symptoms such as weight loss, yellowing of the skin and eyes (jaundice) and swelling of the tummy (ascites) are usually only seen when the disease is at an advanced stage.

The 3 stages of alcohol-related liver disease

Alcohol-related fatty liver

Often completely reversible



A build-up of fat in the liver.

The amount of scarring (fibrosis) in your liver is linked to how serious your liver disease is.

Alcohol-related hepatitis

Sometimes reversible



Scar tissue forms (fibrosis) and ongoing alcohol use causes inflammation in the fatty liver.

As fibrosis gets worse it forms knots and tangles (cross-links) in the scar fibres which cannot be easily undone.

Cirrhosis

Usually irreversible, but you can often stop it getting worse



The build-up of scar tissue makes the liver hard and stops it working properly.

The more advanced your liver disease gets, the quicker it can worsen.

Cirrhosis can lead to liver cancer or liver failure

By finding any damage early, you could prevent it getting worse or even reverse it.

You might only find out you have alcohol-related liver disease during tests for other health problems. Many people are only diagnosed with alcohol-related liver disease after going to A&E with symptoms of serious liver disease or liver failure.

If your doctor thinks you have any form of liver disease they will try to find out what is causing it and how damaged your liver is. This will include special blood tests and scans which are usually carried out at a hospital.

If your symptoms or blood tests suggest alcohol-related liver disease you might need further tests to measure how scarred your liver has become.

It's important to give your doctor as much information as you can. This will help them to diagnose your condition correctly and give you the right care.

What happens next?

Your doctor will do some more tests to understand how much scarring there is likely to be in your liver and how serious your alcohol-related liver disease is. This is very important and will help your doctor to decide on your care.

The medical name for scarring is fibrosis. It is measured on a scale from 0 to 4. The higher the number, the more scarring there is and the more severe it is. Most doctors use a scoring system based on the results of several blood tests to judge how much scarring you have. Sometimes people have a special scan to test their liver stiffness (transient elastography eg FibroScan®) or have a liver biopsy.

You doctor should also refer you to a liver specialist. This will either be a hepatologist or gastroenterologist. You have the right to choose which hospital your doctor refers you to. The British Liver Trust can advise you which hospitals have specialist liver units near you.

Treating and monitoring your condition

Once you have been diagnosed your treatment plan will depend on which stage of alcohol-related liver disease you have.

If your liver disease is at an early to moderate stage the aim will be to cure your condition, by:

- giving your liver a chance to repair itself
- preventing further damage.

If it's more advanced, your treatment will aim to stabilise your liver disease and stop it from getting worse. You will be treated for any complications, such as bloating (ascites) or bleeding (varices). Visit our website to read more about treating complications of cirrhosis.

It's important to have regular appointments with your doctor or specialist so they can monitor your condition. They will be able to provide you

with more information on how often these should be, who with and what to expect.

You should also have fibrosis tests to check the scarring in your liver every 2 years. This is important because there are often no symptoms to alert you or your doctor if your disease is getting worse.

If you have cirrhosis, you'll need monitoring every six months for the rest of your life, which will include checking (surveillance) for a type of liver cancer called hepatocellular carcinoma.

Liver Transplants

There's a general assumption that if you have later stage alcohol-related liver disease you can't have a liver transplant, but this isn't true. Things have changed, which means you can be eligible if it's the right treatment for you. Speak to your liver specialist about having a transplant.

We've created a helpful set of questions to help you make the most of appointments with your doctor. You can download these at www.britishlivertrust.org.uk/arld

What does treatment for alcohol-related liver disease involve?

If you can stop drinking alcohol and eat healthily, you'll reduce the risk of further damaging your liver – and give it the best chance of recovering.

Stop drinking alcohol

If you have alcohol-related fatty liver, the damage may be reversed if you stop for a period of time (months or years). After this, it's usually safe to start drinking again if you stick to the recommended government guidelines. Speak to your doctor if you are thinking of starting drinking again, to check it is safe for you.

If you have a more serious form of alcohol-related liver disease, such as alcohol-related hepatitis or cirrhosis, your doctor will advise you to stop drinking completely (lifelong abstinence) to prevent further damage.

Lots of people find it hard to stop drinking or cut down, so ask your doctor for help if you need it. They can refer you to specialist advice and support from alcohol services.

Diet and nutrition

Not getting the right nutrients from your diet makes it harder for your liver to recover, so eating well is key to treating your condition.

For earlier stage alcohol-related liver disease, focus on eating a healthy balanced diet that includes lots of vegetables, fruit, wholegrain carbohydrates (such as wholemeal bread or brown rice) and lean protein (such as chicken, fish or tofu). Cut down on highly processed foods and snacks, especially those that are high in fat, sugar, or salt.

If you have alcohol-related hepatitis or cirrhosis, as well as eating a healthy balanced diet you may need to follow special advice to make sure you get enough energy (calories) and protein, and not too much salt. This will also prevent muscle wasting and weakness.

The above advice is more general and may not apply to everyone. Your diet and nutrition should be regularly reviewed by a liver specialist or dietitian with experience in advising liver disease patients. They can give you personalised advice based on your individual needs.

Weight and exercise

Carrying extra bodyweight can cause liver damage too. So keeping your weight in the healthy range, and losing weight if you need to, helps stop your liver getting more damaged. And helps give your liver a chance to repair itself and reverse your liver disease.

Doing regular physical activity or exercise can help keep you strong and prevent muscle wasting. Do what you can manage each day – doing something, even something small, is much better than nothing.

Where can I get advice and support?

Ask your doctor how they can help you. They might be able to refer you to support services that can help you stop drinking alcohol or to specialists like a dietitian.

The British Liver Trust are here to help everyone with liver disease

- Read and download information online.
Scan the code with your phone or visit www.britishlivertrust.org.uk/arld
- Call our nurse-led helpline on **0800 652 7330**.
- Join our online community www.healthunlocked.com/britishlivertrust
- Join one of our Support Groups



Other useful websites

NHS alcohol addiction support services

www.nhs.uk/service-search/find-an-alcohol-addiction-service/location

Find out about alcohol addiction services in your area.

NHS alcohol support resources www.nhs.uk/live-well/alcohol-support

Facts about alcohol and support for cutting down or stopping drinking.

Mind www.mind.org.uk

Advice and support to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem.

Samaritans www.samaritans.org or call **116 123** for free

Samaritans are there to listen to whatever is troubling you, no matter how big or small. You can call, text or email them 24 hours a day, every day.

Call our office: 01425 481 320

Email us: info@britishlivertrust.org.uk

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