

Overview-Cirrhosis

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Cirrhosis is scarring of the liver caused by long-term liver damage. The scar tissue prevents the liver working properly.

Cirrhosis can eventually lead to liver failure, where your liver stops working, which can be fatal.

But it usually takes years for the condition to reach this stage and treatment can help slow its progression.

Symptoms of cirrhosis

You may not have any symptoms during the early stages of cirrhosis. As your liver becomes more damaged, you may:

- feel very tired and weak
- feel nauseous
- lose your appetite
- [lose your sex drive](#)

As the condition gets worse, further symptoms can include:

- yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes ([jaundice](#))
- [vomiting blood](#)
- itchy skin
- dark, tarry-looking poo
- a tendency to bleed or bruise more easily
- swollen legs ([oedema](#)) or tummy (ascites) from a build-up of fluid

See your GP if you think you may have cirrhosis.

Diagnosing cirrhosis

If your GP suspects cirrhosis, they'll check your medical history and carry out a physical examination to look for signs of long-term liver disease.

You may have tests to confirm the diagnosis. Tests include:

- [blood tests](#)
- **scans** – an [ultrasound scan](#), transient elastography scan, [CT scan](#), or [MRI scan](#)
- **liver biopsy** – a fine needle is used to remove a sample of liver cells so they can be examined under a microscope
- [endoscopy](#) – a thin, flexible tube with a light and camera at the end (an endoscope) is passed down your throat and into your stomach; images of your oesophagus and stomach can show swollen veins (varices), which are a sign of cirrhosis

Treating cirrhosis

There's currently no cure for cirrhosis. But it's possible to manage the symptoms and any complications, and slow its progression.

Treating the underlying cause, such as using [anti-viral medication](#) to treat a hepatitis C infection, can also stop cirrhosis getting worse.

You may be advised to cut down on or stop drinking alcohol, or lose weight if you're overweight. A wide range of [alcohol support](#) services are available.

If your liver is severely scarred, it can stop functioning. In this case, a [liver transplant](#) is the only treatment option.

What causes cirrhosis?

In the UK, the most common causes of cirrhosis are:

- drinking too much alcohol over many years
- being infected with hepatitis for a long time, particularly [hepatitis C](#)
- non-alcoholic steatohepatitis – a more severe form of [non-alcoholic fatty liver disease](#), where the liver becomes inflamed as the result of a build-up of excess fat

Alcohol consumption

Drinking too much alcohol can damage the liver's cells.

Alcohol-related cirrhosis usually develops after 10 or more years of heavy drinking.

Women who drink heavily are more likely to get liver damage than men, partly because of their different size and build.

Preventing cirrhosis

Limit alcohol

The best way of preventing alcohol-related cirrhosis is to drink within the recommended limits:

- men and women should not regularly drink more than 14 units of alcohol a week
 - spread your drinking over 3 days or more if you drink as much as 14 units a week
- You should stop drinking alcohol immediately if you have alcohol-related cirrhosis. Alcohol speeds up the rate at which cirrhosis progresses, regardless of the cause.

Your GP can give you help and advice if you're finding it difficult to cut down the amount you drink.

Protect yourself from hepatitis

Hepatitis B and C are infections you can get by having unprotected sex or sharing needles to inject drugs.

Using a [condom](#) during sex and not injecting [drugs](#) will reduce your risk of getting hepatitis B and C.

A vaccine for [hepatitis B](#) is available, but there's currently no vaccine for [hepatitis C](#).

Aim for a healthy weight

To reduce your risk of developing non-alcoholic fatty liver disease, which can lead to cirrhosis, try to maintain a healthy weight by having a [healthy, balanced diet](#) and [exercising regularly](#).

The liver

The liver is an important organ that carries out hundreds of jobs vital for sustaining life.

For example, it:

- stores glycogen, a carbohydrate that produces short-term energy
- makes bile, which helps digest fats
- makes substances that clot the blood
- processes and removes alcohol, toxins or drugs

Your liver is very tough. It'll keep working even if badly damaged, and can continue to repair itself until it's severely damaged.