

Taking medications for cirrhosis

Beta blockers



You've been prescribed medications, called "beta blockers", because you have cirrhosis. This fact sheet explains what they're for, how to take them, and what precautions to take.

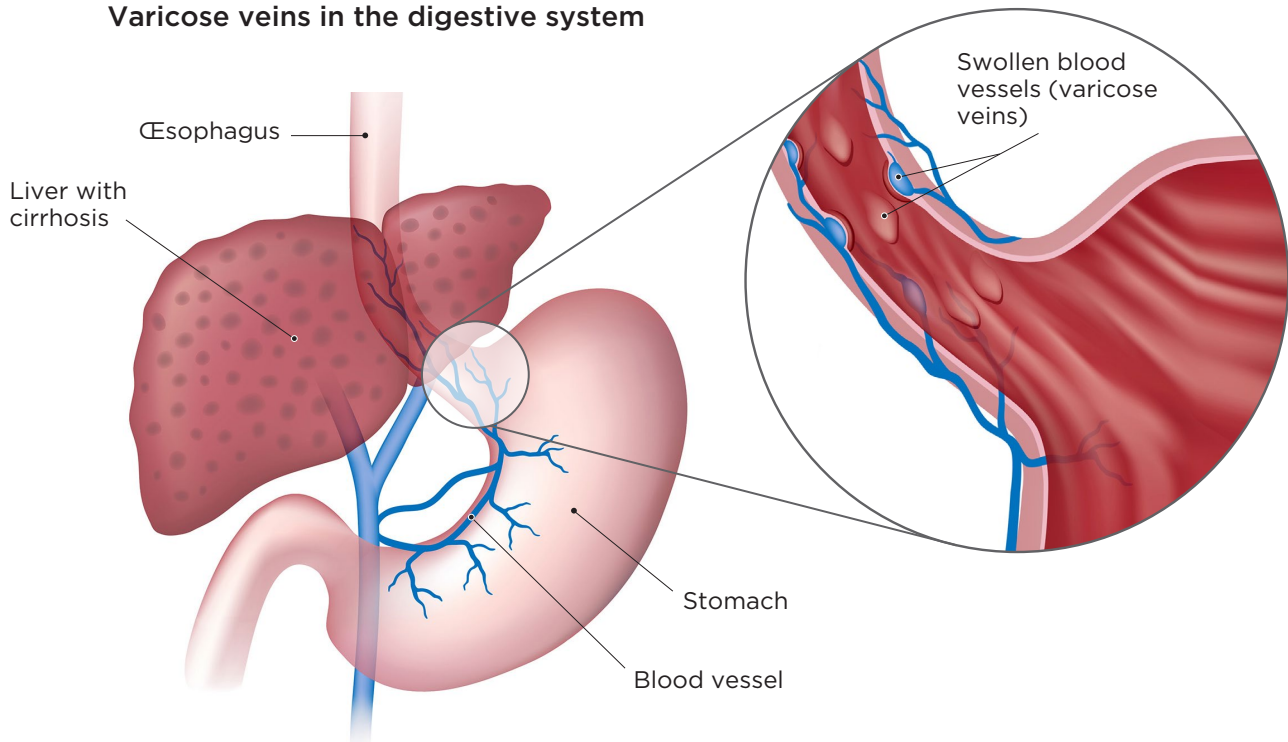
Why have these medications been prescribed for me?

They've been prescribed to prevent some of the complications that cirrhosis can cause. See the fact sheet [Living with cirrhosis](#).

This disease occurs when the liver has developed scarring, or "scar tissue". This makes it more rigid and narrows the blood vessels that run through it.

Because it's harder for blood to pass through the liver, it passes instead through other organs, such as the esophagus, stomach, or rectum. This causes the blood pressure to rise and the blood vessels in these organs to swell. These swollen vessels, called varicose veins, can rupture and cause serious bleeding if the pressure remains high.

Varicose veins in the digestive system



How can these medications help me?

Beta-blockers make your heart beat more slowly. This reduces blood pressure and lowers the risk of varicose veins bursting.

The most commonly prescribed beta-blockers for cirrhosis are:

- carvedilol
- nadolol
- propranolol

How should I take them?

These medications come in the form of tablets to be taken 1 or 2 times a day. Follow the instructions you were given.

You should take the medication with breakfast, unless your doctor or pharmacist tells you otherwise. If you need to take them twice a day, you should take the second dose just before going to bed.

If you stop the treatment, it's important to notify your doctor.



What should I do if I forget to take a dose?

You should **never double** the dose.

If you take these medications once a day, and you realize you forgot it:

- > **less than 12 hours after the scheduled time:** take another dose right away, whether you're fasting or not.
- > **more than 12 hours:** skip the dose.

If you're taking these medications twice a day, and you realize you've skipped one:

- > **less than 6 hours after the scheduled time:** take another dose right away, whether you're fasting or not.
- > **more than 6 hours:** skip the dose.

How long does the treatment take?

The duration of treatment varies from case to case and depending on the progression of the disease. Some people need to take it for a few months and others for life.

Sometimes the treatment has to be stopped because of side effects.

What are the side effects?

Some possible side effects of beta-blockers are:

- > Nausea at the start of treatment
- > Fatigue (especially in the beginning)
- > Difficulty doing any physical activity
- > Dizziness. If you feel dizzy, get up slowly and don't do anything that requires concentration (such as driving)
- > Low sexual desire and erectile dysfunction
- > Asthma that gets worse

Is there any risk of addiction?

No. However, stopping these medications suddenly may cause your blood pressure and heart rate to rise.

Don't stop taking them without checking with your doctor or pharmacist.

Can I take these medications if I'm pregnant or breastfeeding?

It's generally advisable to continue treatment during pregnancy. However, this requires medical monitoring during the last 6 months of pregnancy.

If you're breastfeeding, pregnant, or planning to become pregnant, tell your doctor.



Can I take other medications or natural health products?

Some over-the-counter medications or natural products may increase the effect of beta-blockers. Ask your doctor or pharmacist for advice before taking any new medication.

Where should I store these medications?



Store them in a safe place, out of the reach of children.



ATTENTION

Don't store them in a kitchen or bathroom, as these medications are sensitive to heat and humidity.

What symptoms should I watch for?

It's important to make sure that your blood pressure and heart rate aren't too low. Measure them regularly throughout your treatment.

At the beginning of your treatment or whenever your doctor changes your dose, do this 2 to 3 times a week. Also do it if you have a temperature, by mouth, that is higher than 38°C (100.4°F).

Record these numbers, including for your **blood pressure**, in a notebook (see Useful Resources). You should show them to your doctor at your follow-up appointment.

The content of this document in no way replaces the recommendations and diagnoses made, or the treatment suggested by your health professional.

When should I seek advice?

Stop taking your medication and call your doctor if:

- your blood pressure is lower than 90/50 mmHg
- your pulse is less than 50 heartbeats per minute

If your blood pressure is lower than usual and you feel weak or dizzy, talk to your doctor, pharmacist, or follow-up nurse.

Call a nurse on the Health Patient CHUM Hotline (ligne Santé Patient) at **514 890-8086** if you have any of the following signs that indicate bleeding in the digestive system:

- Vomiting with red blood
- Vomiting that looks like coffee grounds
- Dark black stools (melena)
- Stools with red blood

This service is available 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. When calling, be sure to have your health insurance card on hand.



USEFUL RESOURCES

Measuring your blood pressure at home. Available online:

> hypertension.ca

Click on Hypertension and you → Under Track Your Blood Pressure, click on Download Patient Resources → Blood Pressure Log

Other health sheets published by the CHUM are available. Ask for those that might fit your situation.



You can also find them on our website

chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante