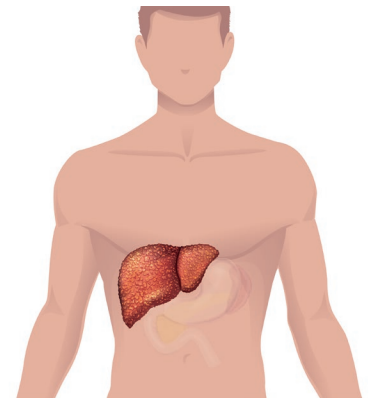


# Living with cirrhosis

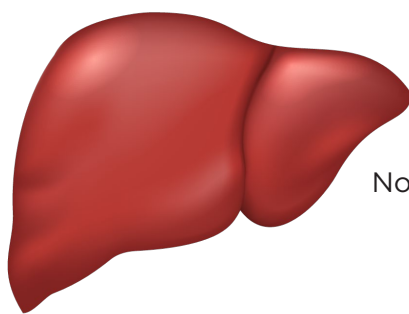


You may have cirrhosis. This fact sheet explains what this liver disease is, what tests you might have, and how it's treated.

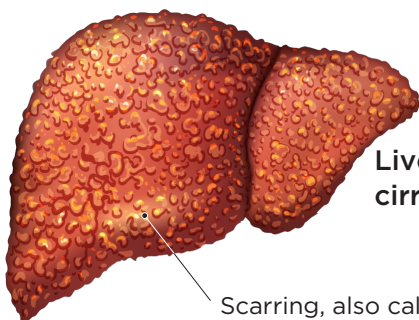
## What is cirrhosis?

The liver can have scarring, also called fibrosis. When there's a lot of scarring, it prevents your liver from doing what it needs to do (e.g., making essential proteins; cleaning the blood; producing a substance, called bile, that helps with digestion). This is called cirrhosis.

Often, cirrhosis doesn't cause symptoms until it's very advanced. These symptoms vary from person to person.



Normal liver



Liver with cirrhosis

Scarring, also called fibrosis

## Why do I have this disease?

This disease is sometimes caused by alcohol consumption, but not always. It can have several causes.

The main ones are:

- > too much fat in the liver (metabolic steatohepatitis). You're more likely to have this problem if you're overweight or diabetic, or if you don't move enough.
- > a disease passed down from your parents (e.g., hereditary hemochromatosis, Wilson's disease, alpha-1 antitrypsin deficiency, cystic fibrosis).
- > disorders related to bile production (cholestatic diseases).
- > inflammation of the liver (hepatitis).
- > a medication reaction.

## What are the potential consequences of this disease?

Cirrhosis is a serious disease. If not treated, it can cause:

- > liver failure
- > liver cancer

The problems it causes are sometimes so serious that a new liver must be transplanted.

## What tests or exams will I have?

Your doctor may order:

- > blood tests and radiology exams to find out about the damage to your liver



- > a screening test for liver cancer
- > an examination of your digestive system using a camera (gastroscopy) to see if there are any swollen blood vessels (varicose veins)
- > a liver biopsy. See the fact sheet [Preparing for a liver biopsy](#)

## How is this disease treated?

To manage the symptoms and prevent more serious problems, your care team may suggest treatments or diets, such as:

- Taking medications to eliminate excess water from your body (diuretics).
- Eating low-salt foods to reduce water in your abdomen (ascites) or swelling in your legs (edema).
- Taking medications that make your heart beat more slowly and lower the pressure in your varicose veins (beta blockers). This reduces the risk of bleeding in your digestive system.
- Having a snack tailored to your condition 1 to 2 hours before bedtime.
- Drinking less liquid, if indicated.

- Take a laxative (lactulose). This treatment helps to evacuate through your stools the excess ammonia that your liver can no longer eliminate. This will help keep your mind clear and not confused. See the health sheet [Le lactulose - Pour prévenir l'encéphalopathie hépatique](#) (French only).

In the most severe cases, a liver transplant is required.

If your cirrhosis is caused by a virus (e.g., hepatitis B and C), treating the infection will be an important part of your care.



It's important to take the medications as prescribed and follow the advice about what to eat. This can prevent the disease from getting so severe that you need a transplant.

## How can I take care of myself now?

Even if the scars remain forever, their effects can still be minimized.

Most people with cirrhosis lead normal lives. They continue to work without being bothered by the disease.

There are several things you can do to make this happen this in your case.

### LIFESTYLE HABITS

- > Stop drinking alcohol. It hurts your liver, even if it isn't the cause of your cirrhosis.
- > Stop smoking and using drugs.



- > Eat healthy foods. A balanced diet is important to prevent malnutrition. It's advisable to eat plant-based proteins (e.g., tofu, chickpeas, lentils). As they're rich in fiber and low in harmful fats, they reduce the risk of complications related to your liver disease.
- > Unless your doctor advises otherwise, be physically active and drink enough water.
- > Sleep can help. Take naps if necessary.

#### NON-PRESCRIPTION MEDICATIONS

- > Ask your doctor or pharmacist what pain medications you can take if needed.



#### ATTENTION

- > Don't take more than 2 grams (or 4 tablets) of Tylenol Extra Strength per day.
- > Don't take anti-inflammatory drugs (e.g., Advil, aspirin, Motrin). With cirrhosis, these drugs can cause bleeding.
- > Narcotics and sleeping pills should be used as little as possible. They can cause confusion.
- > Don't take natural products or over-the-counter medications without first talking to your doctor and pharmacist.



## Are there any symptoms to watch for?

Call **9-1-1** or the on-call hepatologist at **514 890-8444** if you have any of the following symptoms, which may indicate bleeding in the digestive system:

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

Call the Hepatology Clinic at **514 890-8000, ext. 34037**, if you have any of the following symptoms:

- > Swollen legs (edema) or a swollen stomach (ascites). These are signs of a water accumulation problem in the body.
- > Swollen and painful abdomen. This is a sign of an infection caused by bacteria (peritonitis).
- > Confusion, memory loss, difficulty concentrating, personality changes, changes in sleep patterns, or difficulty moving. These are signs that the liver is no longer able to eliminate toxins that reach the brain (hepatic encephalopathy).
- > Weight loss that does not stop, with a decrease in muscle mass.
- > Great fatigue.
- > Yellow skin or eyes (jaundice).
- > Itchy skin.
- > Loss of appetite.
- > Dark tea-colored urine.
- > Nosebleeds.
- > Bleeding or bruised gums.



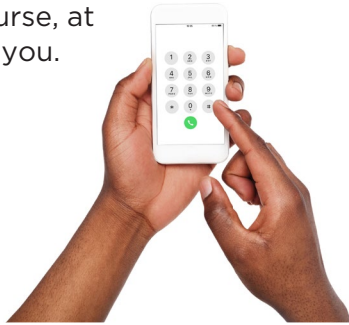
## What should I do if I need to cancel or postpone my appointment?

Call the CHUM Appointment Centre, at **514 890-8051**.

## Who can I contact for help or to ask questions?

You can call:

- > the Hepatology Clinic, at **514 890-8000**, ext. **34037**, from 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m.
- > your follow-up nurse, at number given to you.



## USEFUL RESOURCES

For more on this subject, here are some sources of information:

Canadian Liver Foundation:  
> [liver.ca](http://liver.ca)

CATIE:  
> [catie.ca](http://catie.ca)

In the search bar on the home page, enter “understanding cirrhosis”, then in the results, scroll down to the document Understanding Cirrhosis of the Liver: First Steps for the newly diagnosed.

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](http://chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante)



## NOTEPAD



### Questions

Write down any questions you want to ask your care team so you don't forget anything.



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

To find out more about the Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal  
[chumontreal.qc.ca](http://chumontreal.qc.ca)