

ALCOHOL RELATED LIVER DISEASE

After the brain, the liver is the most complex organ in the body. It is situated in the upper right part of the abdomen.



Functions of the liver include:

- Filtering toxins (including alcohol) from the blood.
- Regulating cholesterol levels in the blood.
- Helping to fight infection and disease.
- Helping to process fats and proteins from digested food.
- Making proteins that are essential for blood to clot.

The liver is resilient and can regenerate itself when damaged. Each time the liver filters alcohol, some of the liver cells die. The liver can develop new cells, but prolonged alcohol misuse over many years can seriously damage the liver beyond repair. Reduced liver function as a result of alcohol misuse is known as alcoholic liver disease.

FATTY LIVER DISEASE

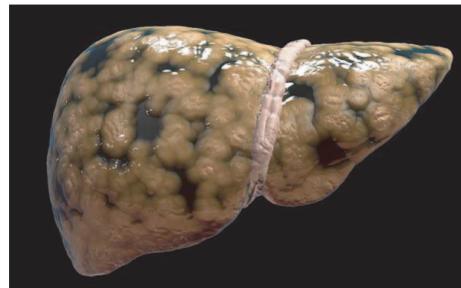
A healthy liver should contain little or no fat. However when the liver breaks down alcohol it stores the fat from this process in the liver.

With excessive and or prolonged alcohol misuse too much of this fat can build up affecting liver functions. Early signs of alcohol misuse can be fatty liver disease which can be diagnosed via blood test. It is possible to develop fatty liver disease without drinking. This is called 'non-alcoholic fatty liver disease' (NAFLD) and usually occurs in those who are overweight and have a poor diet.

A fatty liver returns to normal if drinking returns to within the recommended limit. If drinking persists above that limit the risk of more serious liver damage is increased.



A Normal Healthy Liver



A Liver with Alcoholic Fatty Liver Disease

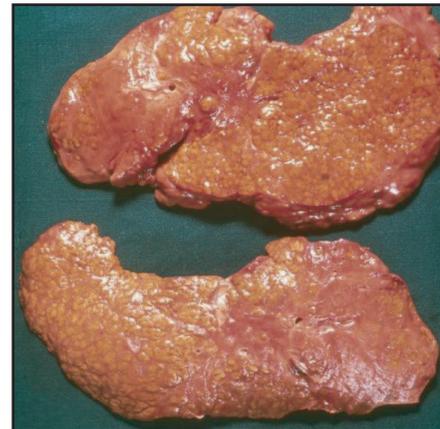
ALCOHOLIC HEPATITIS

Alcoholic Hepatitis can develop if excessive and or prolonged alcohol use persists. Alcoholic Hepatitis causes the liver to become sore and inflamed, but can range from mild through to severe, and in some cases chronic.

Mild hepatitis may not cause any symptoms. The only indication of inflammation may be an abnormal level of liver enzymes in the blood, which can be detected by a blood test. However, in some cases the hepatitis becomes persistent (chronic), which can gradually damage the liver and eventually cause cirrhosis.

Severe hepatitis tends to cause symptoms such as feeling sick, jaundice (yellowing of the skin, caused by a high level of bilirubin - a chemical normally metabolized in the liver), generally feeling unwell and, sometimes, pain over the liver. A very severe bout of alcoholic hepatitis can quickly lead to liver failure. This can cause deep jaundice, blood clotting problems, confusion, coma and bleeding into the guts, and is often fatal.

The main treatment for alcoholic hepatitis is to provide adequate nutrition (this sometimes involves passing liquid feeds through a tube into the stomach), and steroids.



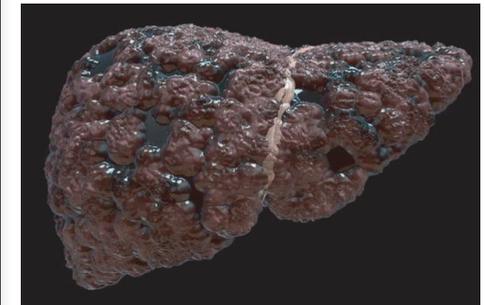
A Liver with Alcoholic Hepatitis

ALCOHOLIC CIRRHOSIS

Cirrhosis is the final stage of alcoholic liver disease and happens when prolonged inflammation (Hepatitis) causes scar tissue to form on the liver which in turn causes loss of function.

Scar tissue affects the normal structure and repair of the liver. The liver cells become damaged and die as scar tissue takes over. This can also affect blood flow through the liver causing a build up of pressure in the blood vessels. Loss of liver function can be life threatening.

Damage to the liver caused by cirrhosis is not reversible. However, in mild to moderate cases stopping drinking alcohol immediately can prevent further damage and lead to a slow recovery of liver functions. In more severe cases a liver transplant may be required although this is not often offered to patients with a long history of alcohol abuse.



Cirrhosis of the Liver



Postnecrotic Cirrhosis