

Information Sheet: Liver Disease

This handout is designed to answer some of the common questions you may have regarding liver disease. If you have any further questions or are unsure of anything written in this handout, please do not hesitate to ask your nurse, doctor or another member of your healthcare team.

What makes my skin and eyes appear yellow?

Your skin and eyes appear yellow because you are suffering from a condition called jaundice. Jaundice occurs because your damaged liver cells are unable to remove a product called bilirubin (a chemical that occurs in the blood as a waste product of old red blood cells). Therefore, an increased amount of bilirubin remains in the bloodstream resulting in the yellow appearance. As well as your skin and eyes appearing yellow, your stools may also appear light in colour and your urine may appear darker than normal. Jaundice itself does not cause any problems however the underlying disease, which causes the jaundice, should be treated.

Why is my skin so itchy?

The high amount of bilirubin in the blood can also cause your skin to be itchy. Medically this is known as pruritus. This itchiness can be relieved by avoiding hot showers, using moisturising shower gels rather than soap, and applying moisturiser after showering. Avoiding skin contact with irritant clothing such as those with high wool or synthetic content can also help. A number of medications can also help but if the itchiness persists speak to your doctor.

How is this extra fluid treated?

Reducing salt intake can help control the accumulation of fluid. However, diuretic therapy is often needed (fluid medications such as furosemide or spironolactone) which encourages fluid to be removed via urine. You may also be required to have an ascitic tap to remove ascites (fluid collecting in the abdomen). This is a procedure whereby a needle is inserted into the abdomen and the excess fluid is drained away.

Excess fluid in the chest cavity is known as a pleural effusion. This may cause you to become short of breath and you may need to wear some oxygen to help with your breathing. Pleural effusions may respond to diuretic therapy, however sometimes a pleural tap is needed. This is similar to an ascitic tap but in this case a needle is inserted into the space surrounding the lungs to drain the excess fluid.

How does albumin work?

Due to the low levels of albumin it may be necessary for you to be given some albumin replacement. Albumin is a protein in the blood that is produced by the liver. A major responsibility of albumin is to ensure the fluid in the body remains in the vascular system. This is done through a mechanism known as oncotic pressure. When there is not enough albumin to maintain this pressure, fluid may leak out of the vascular system into the tissue spaces, which reduces the volume of fluid circulating around your body.

What do my 'numbers' refer to?

Your numbers refer to a group of blood tests known as liver function tests. These tests provide a measure of your liver function, and give your doctors and nurses an indication of the injury and inflammation patterns occurring in the liver. They may also give an indication of the cause of your liver disease.

What is encephalopathy and why do I need to have lactulose so often?

Encephalopathy refers to a change in mental state due to the build up of ammonia and other chemicals in the blood stream. These can enter the brain and cause you to become confused, drowsy, forgetful and may affect mood and behaviour changes. The most accepted form of treatment is lactulose. Lactulose acts primarily by clearing toxins including ammonia from the bowel. If you are suffering from symptoms of encephalopathy it is important you take enough lactulose to have at least 2-3 soft bowel actions per day.

Why do I bleed so easily from different parts of my body?

Your liver has many functions, one of which includes producing clotting factors. Clotting factors are responsible for preventing internal and external bleeds throughout the body. Before any procedure where you are at risk of bleeding, blood products such as packed cells, platelets or fresh frozen plasma may be given depending on the results of a recent clotting profile.

For Further Information

Please don't hesitate to ask your nurse or doctor any further questions you may have. Once you have left the hospital you can call your local doctor for general information

For information on your diet call the nutrition and dietetics department; for information on your medications call the pharmacy department. Both can be reached through switch on 9496 5000.

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