

Liver issues from excessive drinking

Heavy alcohol intake can damage the liver in various ways, causing inflammation, fatty liver and scarring, says senior consultant Ho Choon Kiat



Excessive drinking can damage various parts of the body including the liver, stomach, oesophagus, nerves and brain.

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Liver disease can occur after years of excessive alcohol consumption but the affliction does not occur in every heavy drinker. Chances of getting liver disease, however, increase with more time spent drinking and with more alcohol consumed. Dr Ho Choon Kiat, a senior consultant at Nexus Surgical Associates, explains more about the disease and its treatment methods.

Q My 49-year-old husband is a heavy drinker. He was recently diagnosed with liver disease. What is it and how does alcohol affect the liver?

Liver disease occurs when there is abnormal functioning of the liver, abnormalities with its structure, or both.

Drinking excessive alcohol affects both liver function and structure. Too much alcohol leads to a build-up of fats in the liver cells, a condition known as fatty liver. If left untreated, it can progress to liver inflammation, or hepatitis.

Binge drinking over several days may also lead to acute or short-term hepatitis.

Once hepatitis occurs, there is injury to the liver and scar tissues will form as they heal. Repeated bouts of acute hepatitis will increase the scar tissue – also known as fibrosis – in the liver, and may lead to a condition called liver cirrhosis, which means hardening of the liver.

At this stage, the liver's function is permanently impaired and may even fail. Furthermore, a cirrhotic liver has a higher risk of developing liver cancer.

Q What are the risk factors of liver disease?

A common risk factor is fatty liver, usually caused by an unhealthy diet and lack of regular exercise.

In Singapore, another common risk factor is Hepatitis B infection. Other less common risk factors include the intake of certain drugs such as an overdose of paracetamol, or certain hereditary

diseases, such as Wilson's disease, which causes an excessive accumulation of copper in the liver.

Q What are some other potential health problems of excessive alcohol consumption?

Besides affecting the liver, other potential health issues include:

- Stomach inflammation and ulcers.
- Cancers of the mouth, throat and oesophagus.
- Nerve damage: The person may notice progressive weakness of his thigh muscles.
- A type of brain damage known as Wernicke's encephalopathy: The patient experiences visual problems, bouts of confusion and may have issues walking properly.
- Psychiatric disorders: The person develops a dependence on alcohol and may experience withdrawal symptoms without it.

Q How can damage to the liver be treated?

If liver damage is due to excessive alcohol intake, then stop drinking – some of the injury done to the liver can be reversible.

But if the damage is due to fatty liver – especially if the person is overweight – the patient needs to lose weight and eat healthily.

If there is hepatitis caused by fatty liver, the person needs to lose 7 to 10 per cent of his body weight. To achieve this, complement a healthy diet with regular exercise. Aim for 150 to 200 minutes of aerobic exercises per week, in three to five sessions.



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