

# Alcohol and the Liver



UHN

## Information for patients



### What contains alcohol?

Alcohol is found in beer, wine and hard liquor. Some types of fermented fruits can also contain alcohol. Foods that use alcohol in the cooking also contain it. Your body is not able to tell where the alcohol came from, only that it is present in what you are eating or drinking.

### What happens when a person has a drink?

When a person has an alcoholic drink, the alcohol is absorbed directly into the blood through the wall of the stomach and intestine. Then it quickly spreads throughout the body. Our body is made up of cells and when the alcohol enters a cell, it changes how the cell works.

The liver is the organ in your body that processes alcohol so it is not toxic to your body. But the liver can only handle a certain amount of alcohol over a certain time. Drinking

**44** *This information is to be used for informational purposes only and is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Please consult your health care provider for advice about a specific medical condition. A single copy of these materials may be reprinted for non-commercial personal use only.*

© 2009 University Health Network. All rights reserved.

**Author:** Colina Yim NP & Dr. Hemant Shah, TWH Liver Clinic

**Created:** 02/2009

**Form:** D-5108



too much alcohol can exceed the ability of the liver to process it. When this happens, the extra alcohol can affect how the brain, heart, muscles and other body tissues are able to function.

### **How does alcohol affect the liver?**

When the liver has more alcohol than it can handle, it cannot work properly. The liver detoxifies alcohol in your body, but if a person is drinking more than the liver can remove, liver cells can be destroyed or changed. Changes in liver cells can lead to:

- fat deposits (called fatty liver)
- more serious inflammation (called alcoholic hepatitis) and/or
- permanent scarring (called cirrhosis).

When you have liver disease because of drinking alcohol, it can also lead to liver cancer or death.

### **How much alcohol is safe?**

This depends on a person's body weight, size, gender etc.

For example, women absorb more alcohol from each drink than men do; so they are at a higher risk for alcohol-related liver damage.

Drinking alcohol every day and binge drinking can harm your liver. Binge drinking means when you drink more than 4 or 5 drinks at one time. If you already have a liver disease, you should stop drinking alcohol.

Canadian Liver Foundation recommends that people drink no more than 1 to 2 drinks per day.

### **Is one type of alcohol safer than another?**

No. The type of drink you have is not important – it is the amount of alcohol in a drink that IS important. One drink means:

- 12 oz. (341 ml) light beer
- 5 oz. (142 ml) wine
- 1 ½ oz. (43 ml) spirits



## **What happens when alcohol mixes with medication?**

Mixing alcohol and medications may damage the liver. Alcohol should not be taken with drugs such as Tylenol. Many prescribed and over-the-counter medications interact with alcohol, which changes the effects of the alcohol or the medication. Some examples are antibiotics, blood thinners, antidepressants, sedatives, pain medications and muscle relaxants. Some combinations can be very dangerous.

Talk to your health care provider or pharmacist about your specific situation.

## **How do I know if my liver has been damaged by alcohol?**

75% of your liver has to be damaged before you will feel that anything is wrong. But, by then it may be too late to do anything about it. It's important to see your doctor and be honest about how much alcohol you drink so subtle liver damage can be found early. Through regular check-ups and blood tests, your doctor will be able to find early signs of liver disease.

## **What are the symptoms of alcohol-related liver damage?**

Your entire body will be affected if your liver is not working properly. Symptoms and problems linked to a damaged liver are:

- fatigue (feeling extremely tired)
- losing your appetite
- not being able to fight infections very well
- jaundice (yellow skin and eyes)
- swelling of the stomach area
- internal bleeding (bruising)
- confusion
- kidney failure.

## **Can alcohol-related liver damage be reversed or cured?**

Anyone who drinks alcohol regularly or heavily can get damage to their liver. This damage can be as mild as fatty liver or as serious as alcoholic hepatitis and/or cirrhosis.

Early liver disease such as fatty liver can be reversed completely if a person stops drinking alcohol. When there is no alcohol in the blood for several months, the liver cells can return to normal.

Advanced liver disease such as alcoholic hepatitis and cirrhosis usually damage the liver forever. But, even in these situations, if a person stops drinking alcohol completely, they usually can live a normal life by taking medications to help with complications.



Sometimes, after advanced alcohol-related liver disease develops, then a person can have continued liver damage even if they stop drinking. This can mean taking many medications and occasionally even death.

So, the best thing to do is to drink alcohol in moderation (less than 2 drinks per day) in the first place.

### **What should I do if I think I have alcohol-related liver disease?**

1. Stop drinking alcohol right away.
2. See your doctor and be honest about how much alcohol you are drinking.
3. Make sure your doctor does blood tests to see if your liver is healthy and to make sure nothing else is harming your liver.

For more information visit the Toronto Western Hospital Liver Centre at <http://www.torontoliver.ca/>

This brochure was adapted from the Canadian Liver Foundation. Please contact your doctor or visit <http://www.liver.ca/> for more information.