

## Consulting Gastroenterologist, Hepatologist & Therapeutic Endoscopist

### Alcohol and Liver Disease

This leaflet is designed to help you to understand the impact of alcohol on the liver.

#### What is alcohol liver disease?

Drinking alcohol consistently in moderate amounts over 10 to 20 years can cause alcohol liver disease. There are 3 types of liver conditions:

- a) Fatty liver
- b) Alcoholic hepatitis
- c) Cirrhosis

#### a) Fatty liver:

Accumulation of fat within liver cells in most people who drink regularly. Fatty liver usually causes no symptoms and is completely reversible if one stops drinking alcohol. However in some who continue to drink this can progress into hepatitis.

#### b) Alcoholic hepatitis:

It simple means inflammation of the liver. This can be mild or severe

***Mild:*** Usually no symptoms, detected by blood tests showing abnormal liver enzymes. If this is persistent it can gradually damage the liver resulting in cirrhosis. This form of hepatitis can recover if one stops drinking completely.

***Severe hepatitis:*** This tends to cause symptoms such as nausea, vomiting pain in the upper abdomen, jaundice( yellowing of the skin caused by high bilirubin level). In some cases this can lead to liver failure associated with clotting problems, bleeding, confusion , coma and can be fatal. Patients usually require admission and monitoring in hospital with complete abstinence from alcohol , proper nutrition along with supportive medical treatment. Some cases may need steroids or other anti-inflammatory medication like pentoxifylline. Unfortunately severe hepatitis has a poor outcome with only 50% chance of surviving beyond 3 months.

#### c) Alcoholic Cirrhosis:

Cirrhosis means scarring of liver, whereby normal liver tissue is replaced by scarred tissue(fibrosis). The liver becomes shrunken. This happens gradually if the liver tissue is inflamed for a long period of time. The liver is usually able to repair itself with complete abstinence from alcohol, however it never recovers completely. By stopping drinking you can prevent further damage to your liver and reduce risk of ***decomposition*** . This term is often used by liver specialist to suggest onset of complications from poor liver function. The following ***complications*** can be potentially fatal.

- Jaundice( yellow discolouration of eyes),
- Ascites(swollen belly due to water retention),
- Hepatic encephalopathy( confusion), vomiting of blood from varices (swollen internal veins)
- Liver cancer
- Hepatorenal syndrome: (poor kidney function due to liver disease)
- Malnutrition(poor intake of vitamins, minerals, protein from loss of appetite)

# Dr. Jayshri Shah

MD, DNB, MNAMS, MRCP (UK),  
CCST (Gastroenterology & Hepatology),  
Fellowship in Liver Transplant (UK)

Mobile : +91 -22-40036744 / 9769548674  
Email : jayshrishah0404@gmail.com  
Website : www.gogeth.com

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Most patients will require liver transplantation if there is no improvement in liver function after a period of abstinence from alcohol.

#### Examples to assess the strength of alcohol and units consumption

##### 1 unit of alcohol =

1 glass (125ml) of wine

½ pint(250ml) of average strength beer

1 standard pub measure (25 ml) of spirits

1 measure(25ml) of fortified wine such as sherry or port( 20% alcohol by volume{abv})

##### Number of units in different forms of alcohol:

1. 9 units , 1 bottle of wine( 12% wine , 750 ml bottle)
2. 28 units ,1 bottle of spirit (37%)
3. 2 units( 1 pint of beer, 2.5 to 3 units if premium lager)
4. 1.5 units, 1 can of beer( premium beer 2 units, special brew lager 4 units)
5. Cider(white) = 7.5 to 9 unit/L
6. Cider( brown)= premium lager

**Simple guide:** Many wines and beers are stronger than the more traditional ordinary strengths. A more accurate way of calculating units is as follows:

*The percentage alcohol by volume(% abv) of a drink equals the number of units in one litre of that drink.*

##### Preventing alcoholic liver disease:

If you follow the recommended safe limits of alcohol consumption, you are unlikely to develop liver disease due to alcohol.

**Men:** Should not drink more than 21 units of alcohol /week( and no more than 4 units in any one day)

**Women:** should not exceed 14 units of alcohol/week( and no more than 3 units in any one day)

**Pregnant women** or women trying to conceive should avoid alcohol completely.

**Avoid binge drinking** as this is harmful, although the weekly total may not appear to be high.( e.g taking one bottle of wine in a day or 4-5 pints of beer in a day)