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Medical Management Of Cirrhosis of the Liver

Cirrhosis is a scarring of the liver, caused by inflammation, which can destroy the normal “architecture” of the organ. The liver is responsible for removing poisonous substances from the blood.

While the cause most commonly associated with the condition is excessive alcohol consumption, there are actually a number of other causes including chronic viral hepatitis B and C.

Primary biliary cirrhosis is an uncommon disease mainly affecting women. It is not due to alcohol. Instead, the body mounts an attack on the liver in these patients and the cause is not known.

Autoimmune chronic active hepatitis is another uncommon condition that results in the body’s immune system attacking and destroying liver cells.

A large number of drugs and chemicals can also cause liver damage but few cause cirrhosis. Certain specialized drugs need monitoring for their effect on the liver.

There are a number of metabolic and inherited disorders which allow the accumulation of toxins in the liver. The most common is hemochromatosis, which causes excess deposits of iron in the liver.

What are the Symptoms of Cirrhosis?

The number and severity of symptoms may depend on how much damage has occurred to the liver. In the early stages there may be no symptoms at all and the disease may be discovered as a result of an investigation for another illness.

As the disease progresses, tiredness, weakness, lack of energy, loss of appetite, nausea and weight loss may develop.

In the later stages, as the liver struggles to perform all its functions, any or all of these symptoms may be present.

Jaundice: this is the yellowing of the skin and the eyes due to the failure of the liver to remove a substance called bilirubin from the blood.

Nail changes: the shape and appearance of the nails may change. They may be more curved (clubbing) and may be white rather than pink.

Skin changes: about a quarter of patients will have darkening of the skin.

Fluid retention: this is common at some stage in cirrhosis. An important function of the liver is to rid the body of excess fluid through the kidneys and when it fails, fluid gathers in the legs (edema) or in the abdomen (ascites).

Abnormal blood vessels: the most common abnormality is a spider naevus, which is a spot surrounded by fine blood vessels. A red face is also common.

Easy bruising: nosebleeds and easy bruising occur as a result of abnormal blood vessels and delayed clotting because the liver does not make enough clotting proteins.

Enlargement of breasts in men: the liver destroys the female sex hormones and in cirrhosis these accumulate and in men cause enlargement of the breasts and shrinking of the testes.

In the very late stages of the disease, serious complications may occur. These include vomiting of blood, either from ulcers in the stomach or from leaking varicose veins in the lower end of the esophagus (food pipe). This is serious and requires hospital treatment.

In cirrhosis, the blood may bypass the liver and the body's poisonous substances pass to the brain where they may result in alteration in brain function, causing confusion, drowsiness and finally coma. This is called hepatic encephalopathy. This is also serious and requires hospital treatment.

How Is Cirrhosis Of The Liver Diagnosed?

If a clinical examination creates a suspicion of cirrho-

sis of the liver, the diagnosis may be supported by the analysis of blood samples. Although it may be confirmed by ultrasound, it may be necessary to perform a liver biopsy to obtain tissue samples from the liver. This may also give information on the underlying cause of the cirrhosis.

Professional Gastroenterology & Surgery Associates specializes in the care of patients with liver diseases. Call today for information or an appointment.