

# Oesophageal Varices

An information guide



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## What are Oesophageal Varices?

Oesophageal Varices are swollen blood vessels in the oesophagus (the tube that connects the mouth and the stomach).

In people with severe liver disease blood flow through the liver slows down due to scarring. When this happens the pressure in the vein (portal vein) which supplies blood to the liver increases and pushes blood into surrounding blood vessels including blood vessels in the oesophagus.

The extra blood being pushed into these blood vessels can cause them to swell, expand and sometimes burst.

## Who is at risk of developing Oesophageal Varices?

Oesophageal varices can affect people of all ages, male or female, who have liver cirrhosis.

## What are the signs and symptoms of Oesophageal Varices?

Most people with oesophageal varices are not aware that they have them as they do not cause any symptoms until they leak or burst. This causes bleeding which can be severe and is a medical emergency.

### Signs of bleeding include:

- Vomiting blood
- Black, tarry, or bloody stools
- Reduced consciousness

**If you have any of the above symptoms you must attend the nearest A&E Department as soon as possible.**

## **Is there a test for Oesophageal Varices?**

Yes, all patients who have cirrhosis should have a procedure called a gastroscopy to check for oesophageal varices.

This procedure involves a thin flexible tube which is placed into your mouth, down your throat and into your oesophagus.

## **How are Oesophageal Varices treated?**

Treatment often depends on the size and severity of your oesophageal varices, these treatments include:

- Medication – Beta blockers work by reducing the pressure in the swollen blood vessels.
- Banding – Small rubber bands are applied to the varices, this stops the blood supply to the blood vessel and helps to stop them bleeding, eventually they will disappear.
- Injection – This can be given directly into the vein causing the clotting, helping them to stop bleeding. This is usually done when gastric varices are present.

## **Can Oesophageal Varices be prevented?**

Anyone who is diagnosed with cirrhosis (from whatever cause) is advised to have a gastroscopy.

This is to check if you have developed oesophageal varices and so that the correct treatment can be given to avoid the risk of bleeding. The frequency of a gastroscopy is decided by the clinician and dependant on the severity of liver disease.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact:

The Gastroenterology Nurse Specialists - **0161 656 1538**

**If English is not your first language and you need help, please contact the Interpretation and Translation Service**

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