

# Ascites

An information guide



# Ascites

## What is Ascites?

Ascites is the presence of excess fluid in the abdominal cavity. It may be detected by abdominal swelling or some abdominal pain. It occurs over a period of time and is a serious complication.

## What causes Ascites?

The most common cause of ascites reported in the UK are liver cirrhosis and malignancy but the condition may develop as a result of various other problems for example, infection, inflammation or injury.

## What complications may occur?

If the abdomen continues to swell due to the amount of fluid inside, it may result in a reduced appetite, nausea or even vomiting due to the pressure on the stomach.

The swollen abdomen also puts pressure on the diaphragm – the thin layer of muscle that separates the abdomen from the chest cavity. This may cause you to feel short of breath and your breathing pattern may increase.

## Is there anything I can do?

You cannot make the fluid just go away but there are certain measures you can take to help reduce its progress.

- Abstain from alcohol.
- A low salt, high calorie and normal/high protein diet will help.
- Avoid adding salt to meals at the table.
- A small amount of salt can be added when cooking.
- You can have up to 100g of cheese per week.
- You can have up to 4 slices of bread per day.
- Have a carbohydrate-rich snack in the evening.

**Avoid:**

- All processed food.
- Bacon, ham, sausage, pate.
- Fish and meat paste.
- Tinned and packet soup.
- Sauce mixes, stock cubes, soya sauce.
- Tinned vegetables.
- Bottled sauces and chutney.
- Meat and vegetable extracts.
- Salted nuts and crisps.
- Salt substitutes.
- No over-the-counter medications.

The doctor may advise you to cut down on your fluid intake but this varies from patient to patient.

Take your medications as prescribed by the doctor. He will have prescribed water tablets (diuretics). We can judge the effect of these tablets by weighing you regularly and taking a blood test. You should lose weight if you are on the correct dose of water tablets.

Failure to lose weight may mean that the dosage of the tablets may need to be changed. Your doctor will advise you.

Although your urine output may increase, it can take months for the ascites to reduce.

## **What if I continue to put on weight and my abdomen is getting bigger?**

On occasion, the water tablets prescribed may not have the desired effect. Your abdomen will be very big and feel like 'popping'. Your appetite may have lessened and you may feel a little breathless. You will also gain weight.

The doctor will examine you and may make the decision to drain the fluid. This procedure is called Paracentesis.

It involves the insertion of a needle or catheter into the abdomen to drain the fluid. A blood test will need to be done to make sure that you do not have any bleeding or clotting problems. You should tell the doctor if you are taking any medication to prevent or treat blood clots such as warfarin, aspirin or any non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen.

The drainage should take about 6 hours and you may be given some albumin (a blood product containing protein) via a vein to prevent complications. The drain will then be removed and a dressing placed over the site.

The leak should stop spontaneously once you have had the drain removed, but occasionally it may continue to leak and a collection bag will be used instead of a dressing. You will also be advised to lie on the opposite side to where the drain was inserted. This will reduce the leak and improve the healing process. The doctor may prescribe a small dose of antibiotics long term.

If you experience a fever or abdominal pain after the procedure then you are advised to see your doctor as soon as possible.

**It is important** to know that paracentesis will not permanently remove the fluid and it may again accumulate over a period of time and may need to be repeated.

## Contact details

If you have any questions please contact the Gastroenterology Specialist Nurse Service. This service is provided by two registered nurses with specialist experience and who have qualifications in liver disease management.

Working hours 08:30am to 3:30pm, Monday to Friday

Please note we **do not** work on bank holidays

The Royal Oldham Hospital - 0161 656 1538

Mobile – 07805587375

You may leave a message on the office phone and your call will be answered as soon as possible, although this may not be on the same day.

This document was produced with thanks to the British Liver Trust (Registered Charity 298858) [www.britishlivertrust.org.uk](http://www.britishlivertrust.org.uk) or phone the helpline 08006527330.

**Notes:**



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**For general enquiries please contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on 0161 604 5897**

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