

Ascites: What You Need to Know

What is Ascites?

Ascites is caused by accumulation of fluid in the abdominal cavity. The most common cause is cirrhosis of the liver, but other illnesses such as heart failure, kidney failure, infection, or cancer can cause ascites.

Why does the fluid accumulate?

Ascites is common in patients with cirrhosis and usually develops when their liver is beginning to fail. Elevation of the pressure in the veins that run through the liver (portal hypertension) and a decrease in liver function due to the scarring on the liver result in the fluid build-up.

What are the symptoms?

Common symptoms are:

- Rapid weight gain
- Abdominal distention/abdominal pain
- Shortness of breath
- Swelling of the ankles

How is it diagnosed?

Ascites can be diagnosed by physical exam. Diagnosis can also be made by undergoing a procedure called paracentesis. During this procedure, after local anesthesia is given, a needle is inserted to collect a small sample of the fluid to send to the lab for diagnosis.

What does having ascites mean to me?

Most importantly, the liver is not working properly. Discussions surrounding whether or not you are an appropriate candidate for a liver transplant should occur with your doctor.

If ascites are left untreated, peritonitis, blood sepsis, kidney failure could occur. The fluid could migrate into your lung cavities. Treatment is necessary to prevent these bad outcomes.

How are ascites treated?

A **low salt diet** is most important. A diet 2,000 mg of salt or less daily is recommended; this should be discussed with your doctor. Water pills (diuretics) are common to reduce fluid in your body. These water pills affect your body's electrolytes and your doctor will order lab work frequently to monitor the electrolytes. Monitor your daily weight. Your doctor should give you parameters as to when to notify of weight gain.

When the preventative approaches are less than successful, a paracentesis is required. In this procedure, a large amount of fluid is removed with a needle to relieve symptoms. A TIPS procedure may be considered if your ascites cannot be managed with a low salt diet and diuretics (water pills). This procedure is performed by a radiologist. With TIPS, a shunt is placed within the liver to prevent significant fluid accumulation.