



PATIENT EDUCATION: Hepatic Encephalopathy

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW



Q: What is hepatic encephalopathy?

A: It is a change in how your brain works and how you act that is caused by your liver not working well.

Q: How do you know if you have hepatic encephalopathy?

A: Hepatic encephalopathy only happens if you have serious liver disease, also called cirrhosis (sir-o-sis) You might have some of the following problems:

- ◆ Being confused
- ◆ Mood changes
- ◆ Poor memory
- ◆ Shakiness of hands and balance problems
- ◆ Trouble speaking, drawing, and writing clearly
- ◆ Moving, talking, and thinking more slowly than normal



Q: What causes hepatic encephalopathy?

A: People who get this problem have liver damage that is usually caused by hepatitis B or C virus or alcohol. The damage from years of hepatitis or other diseases causes scar tissue to build up in the liver, called cirrhosis, and then the liver does not work very well. The liver cannot process the food and medication like it should. Toxins that are supposed to be removed by the liver build up in the bloodstream. In patients with a lot of cirrhosis, hepatic encephalopathy can be brought on or worsened by big or small changes to the body including:

- ◆ Bleeding in the stomach, intestines, or other parts of the digestive tract
- ◆ Infection
- ◆ Constipation
- ◆ Taking certain medicines
- ◆ Dehydration (not drinking enough fluids or loss of fluids from vomiting/diarrhea)
- ◆ Surgery



Q. Is there a test for hepatic encephalopathy?

A: Most of the time your doctor can tell if you have hepatic encephalopathy by knowing your medical history and examining you. Sometimes ammonia levels in the blood may be high. If your doctor is not sure what is causing confusion, memory loss, or trouble thinking, other tests will be done.

Q: How is hepatic encephalopathy treated?

A: This depends on what is causing the problem. Treatment can include:

- ◆ Taking medicine to treat an infection
- ◆ Taking medicine to have more bowel movements (lactulose)
- ◆ Regularly taking lactulose or other medications to help your body get rid of toxins
- ◆ Stopping medicines that might be causing the problem



Q: What can you do to prevent hepatic encephalopathy?

A: You can lower your chances of getting hepatic encephalopathy by:

- ◆ Following any special diet your medical team has recommended
- ◆ Taking any medications you are given (such as lactulose) as directed.
- ◆ Asking your doctor if any of your other medications might be causing trouble with your liver
- ◆ Checking with your doctor or nurse before starting any new medicines.
- ◆ Never using alcohol or street drugs.
- ◆ Telling your medical team if you feel sleepy or drowsy a lot or if you are very forgetful or have trouble thinking clearly.