

PROGRESSION OF LIVER DISEASE

What does “progression of liver disease” mean?

Simply put, progression of liver disease means that liver damage, regardless of the underlying cause, usually follows the same steps of damage over time. The underlying causes may be different, but the progression of damage tends to be the same for most liver diseases.

Stages of Liver Damage

Inflammation (swelling) of the liver, also known as hepatitis, is usually the first stage of liver disease. Inflammation is generally a sign that the body is trying to fight an infection or heal an injury. Many people with hepatitis have no symptoms; however, some may feel tired or have abdominal (belly area) discomfort.

When liver disease is present, inflammation continues and, over time, leads to the development of scar tissue in the liver called fibrosis. This scar tissue replaces healthy tissue. Fibrosis affects blood flow in the liver, which makes it harder for the liver to function as well as it used to. People with fibrosis usually do not have symptoms, and they may even have normal liver function tests until their liver disease worsens. If the liver disease is diagnosed and successfully treated in the stage of fibrosis, the liver may be able to heal on its own over time.

If fibrosis continues, it can lead to cirrhosis, which is severe scarring of the liver. It can take many years for liver disease to lead to cirrhosis. As the amount of scar tissue in the liver increases, replacing healthy tissue, the liver may lose its ability to function properly. The liver needs to lose about 90% of its function to lead to complications such as jaundice (yellowing of eyes and skin), fluid buildup in the abdomen, infection, or internal bleeding.

Primary liver cancer (hepatocellular carcinoma) can develop during the progression of liver disease. It often occurs only if cirrhosis is present. There are people without cirrhosis, however, who may develop liver cancer. For example, people with chronic (long-term) hepatitis B are at risk for developing primary liver cancer without first having cirrhosis.

Diagnosis and staging of liver disease

Blood tests and imaging tests (MRI, CT scan and others) are the medical tests used to diagnose the stages of liver disease. In some cases, a biopsy may be recommended.

To learn more about liver disease progression, scan the QR code below. For a complete list of free resources, visit: liverfoundation.org/resource-center.

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For questions about liver wellness and disease, or for emotional support to patients at the point of crisis and information on local resources including physician referrals, please contact our Helpline at 1-800-465-4837.

