Ask An Expert: Changing your diet to prevent worsening of cirrhosis

Posted by Lisa Cicciarello Andrews/University of Cincinnati  February 25, 2009  11:08AM

Question: I am 60 year old male who was diagnosed with cirrhosis. I do not drink or smoke. While doing a regular check up, I was diagnosed with cirrhosis. I do not drink or smoke. I would like to know what type of diet will help me get healthy?

Answer: Thanks for your question. It's important to follow a healthy diet to prevent your cirrhosis from getting worse. You've already taken the first step by not drinking alcohol or smoking.

Limit Sodium Intake

In treating cirrhosis, it is recommended that you follow a low sodium diet to prevent further fluid accumulation (ascites) in your abdomen. Ideally, you should eat:

- Fresh or frozen fruits and vegetables
- Lean cuts of fresh meat
- Whole grains
- A variety of low fat dairy products.

Foods to avoid include:

- Table salt or seasoned salt
- Canned soup or other canned items packed with salt
- Lunch meat or processed brats, hot dogs, bologna, salami, etc.
- Soy sauce and other high sodium condiments
- Fast food and restaurant food, which also tends to be high in salt and sodium
- Snack foods such as popcorn, chips, pretzels and crackers can also be high in sodium

Limit your sodium intake to no more than 2,400 mg a day. Read the nutrition facts on the food label to see how much sodium is in the foods you are eating.

Get Enough Protein

Your diet should also contain adequate protein. Without knowing your weight, I cannot tell you how much to eat per day. In general, your protein needs will be a little less than half of your weight in pounds. If you weigh 200 pounds your protein needs would be between 90 to 100 grams per day.

Use your "dry" weight when estimating this amount. If you normally weigh 150 pounds and your weight is up to 200 pounds due to fluid accumulation, use 150 pounds when estimating protein intake.
As long as you are eating a variety of foods you should be getting adequate protein in your diet.

These protein rich foods include:

• Meat, fish, poultry, eggs
• Dried beans and/or lentils
• Cheese and dairy products
• Vegetables and grains

Signs of fat malabsorption

Some people with cirrhosis may experience fatty liver or fat malabsorption. Fat digestion requires bile, which is produced by the liver. If your liver is not functioning up to speed, bile production may decline, making fat digestion more difficult.

If your bowel movements begin to become gray in color or "float", this is a sign of fat malabsorption. Cutting back on high fat foods may help to prevent further fat accumulation in your liver. Food to limit may include:

• Fried foods
• Fast food
• Bacon
• Beef
• Full-fat cheese
• High-fat desserts

Check with your doctor about testing for fatty liver disease.

Watch Your Fluids

If you become fluid overloaded often due to ascites, your doctor may suggest you limit your total fluid intake. You may need to cut back on:

• Water
• Juice
• Soda
• Coffee
• Additional fluids

Most people need about 2 liters of water per day. Those with liver disease should limit their intake to 1.5-2 liters per day total. Again, check with your doctor about a fluid restriction.

For a more individualized meal plan, ask your doctor for a referral to a Registered Dietitian who can evaluate your current eating habits and make more specific recommendations. You can locate one on the American Dietetic Association website