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# Sodium and Liver Failure

**Cirrhosis** is a chronic (long-lasting) liver problem. It results from damaged and scarred liver tissue. It causes an accumulation of fluid in the abdominal area (ascites) and bulging of the veins in the esophagus (varices). This increased pressure can also lead to shortness of breath; ankle, foot or leg swelling; congestion; and fatigue.

**Lifestyle changes may help manage the side effects from liver cirrhosis.**

1. **Limit sodium intake.** A diet high in sodium can cause your body to retain water, causing very uncomfortable abdominal girth.
  - Use healthy seasoning alternatives such as garlic powder, Mrs. Dash®, and fresh herbs or spices.
  - Choose fresh or frozen meats and vegetables whenever possible.
  - Fast food and sit down restaurants use a lot of salt to season their foods. Try to minimize meals eaten out. Ask restaurants to prepare food without salt when possible.
2. **Read the nutrition label.** The salt content of foods is listed as “sodium” in milligrams (mg). Eat foods that have less than 140 mg per serving.
3. **Limit fluid intake if recommended by your doctor.** Sometimes your body will retain too much fluid if you drink too much liquid. Discuss with your doctor how often you should weigh yourself and if you should keep a record of your daily fluid intake.
4. **Medications help to control mental confusion and water retention.** Take your pills at the same time everyday and do not skip a dose. Ask your pharmacist or doctor about the possible side effects of your medication, and if they need to be taken with food.
5. **Try to eat smaller, more frequent meals.** The fluid from ascites can press on your stomach causing you to feel fuller faster. Stored energy is burned faster overnight with cirrhotic liver and a nighttime snack is important to have.
6. **Alcohol:** Avoid alcohol because it will worsen cirrhosis.

**Contact your local VA dietitian for more information.**