

Liver Disease and Portal Hypertension

What is portal hypertension and what causes it?

The **portal vein** is a major blood vessel that leads to the liver. **Portal hypertension** [hi-per-TEN-shun] is when the blood pressure inside the portal vein increases. Increased pressure in the portal vein can cause blood to back up. This can cause other medical problems, such as:

- **Esophageal** [ee-sof-uh-JEE-al] **varices** [VAIR-uh-sees], when the veins in the esophagus (the tube that carries food to your stomach) become enlarged.
- **Ascites** [ah-SITE-eez], or fluid build-up in your abdomen (belly).
- **Splenomegaly** [splen-oh-MEG-ah-lee], when your spleen becomes enlarged.
- **Edema** [eh-DEEM-ah], or swelling in the lower legs.
- **Breast tenderness.**

The main causes of portal hypertension are cirrhosis [si-ROW-sis] and blood clots.

What can I do?

To manage portal hypertension:

- 1 Follow a low-salt diet.
- 2 Take in 67 ounces or less of fluid daily.
- 3 Take blood pressure and diuretic medications exactly as ordered by your doctor.
- 4 Take and record your blood pressure daily.
- 5 Go to all tests and appointments as scheduled.

How is it diagnosed?

Depending on your symptoms, your doctor may order tests to see if you have portal hypertension.

- An **endoscopy** [en-DOS-kuh-pee] is when a thin, flexible tube with a camera and a light on the end is placed in your esophagus while you are sleeping. This allows your doctor to see if you have problems with your esophageal veins.
- An **angiogram** [AN-jee-uh-gram] can tell your doctor if there is a blockage in the portal vein and you need a **shunt** (a device to help lower portal hypertension). During this test, a dye is placed in a vein. The dye makes your veins visible on a special x-ray called a **fluoroscope** [FLOOR-oh-scope].
- Other **imaging tests**, such as a **CT** (computed tomography) scan may also be needed.

How is it treated?

Treatment is usually focused on the cause of the complication and may include:

- Placing **bands** on the varices
- Taking a medication called a **beta-blocker** to lower your blood pressure
- Taking a **diuretic** [dy-uh-RET-ik], or “water pill,” to control the edema
- Having a **paracentesis** [pair-ah-sen-TEE-sis], a procedure to drain the fluid from your abdomen
- Using a catheter to place a **transhepatic** [trans-heh-PAT-ik] **portosystemic** [POR-toh-sis-TEM-ik] **shunt**
- **Liver transplant**, if you qualify

Talk with your doctor about which treatment is best for your situation.

Go to the nearest emergency room or call 911 if you are vomiting blood.

