Dear Alice,

How does the use of alcohol damage the liver?

Answer

Way to be proactive about knowing how substances might impact the body! For most folks, *low-risk* use of alcohol doesn't seem to damage the liver. However, the overuse and abuse of alcohol may have a long-lasting impact on the liver. The liver filters all of the blood in the body, breaking down and eliminating toxins, converting excess blood sugar to glycogen, and many other crucial functions. As such, when overused, alcohol may contribute to a number of health conditions if not used in a low-risk manner. Want to learn more about libations and the liver? Read on!

*High-risk* use of alcohol may cause a condition called fatty liver (also called steatosis). Fat deposits in the liver block the liver cells from their blood supply, depriving them of oxygen and other nutrients, making it harder for the liver to function. The good news is that fatty liver typically reverses if a person stops consuming alcohol. However, if a person continues to drink heavily, this lack of oxygen may kill the liver cells and lead to further complications.

Another condition to consider is *alcoholic hepatitis*. Heavy alcohol consumption might lead to this condition, characterized by inflammation of the liver caused by alcohol. Symptoms may include fever, fatigue, weight loss, nausea, vomiting, and abdominal pain and tenderness. If mild, the condition may reverse over time if a person stops drinking. However, if it's an acute case, it may lead additional complications including high blood pressure in the liver, enlarged veins, kidney failure, and cirrhosis.

A bit more information *cirrhosis* is warranted because it’s the most serious type of liver-related disease. The condition occurs when liver cells die from lack of fresh blood and they're replaced with scar tissue. This condition may result in a multitude of health problems, as well as reduced ability to tolerate alcohol. Warning signs of cirrhosis include jaundice (yellowing of the skin and the whites of the eyes), fatigue, and a swelling of the abdomen and lower extremities. While the damage from it may not be able to be undone, diagnosis and treatment may minimize future damage.

Folks who are diagnosed with alcohol-related liver conditions may be treated in multiple ways.
First and foremost, they're encouraged to stop consuming alcohol. Additional treatments may include monitoring the person's nutrition, medications to reduce liver inflammation, and in advanced cases of cirrhosis, liver transplants. To help prevent liver damage from alcohol use, if you choose to consume alcohol, do so in a low-risk manner and avoid mixing alcohol with other medications as this may strain your liver.

If you want more information about safe drinking habits, be sure to read How do I drink in moderation? [6] in the Go Ask Alice! Alcohol and Other Drugs [7] archives. If you or someone you know is looking to change drinking habits or better understand your relationships with substances, speaking with a health care provider or health promotion specialist may be helpful.

Alice!
Category:
Alcohol & Other Drugs [8]
Alcohol [9]

Related questions

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Hep B vaccine? How often? [14]

Resources

Columbia Health BASICS program (Morningside) [15]
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