

HEPATIC ENCEPHALOPATHY (HE)

What is Hepatic Encephalopathy (HE)?

Hepatic encephalopathy (HE) is a condition that can affect people with cirrhosis. It happens when the liver loses its ability to filter toxins from the body, causing them to build up and lead to symptoms.

Symptoms of HE

Symptoms of HE can vary depending on the stage of the condition (mild to severe). People may develop anxiety, be confused, have trouble with balance or coordination, and have personality changes. Other symptoms include slurred speech, feeling very sleepy, and flapping of hands.

HE can be made worse in certain situations, including but not limited to:

- Dehydration (not getting enough water)
- Infections, internal bleeding, and certain medications
- Worsening cirrhosis

Diagnosing HE

There is no single test that can be done to diagnose HE. Blood work can provide some useful information to identify infections or bleeding, and imaging tests (MRI, CT scans) can also rule out other issues that may be causing symptoms. A doctor can diagnose HE by doing a physical examination and by observing or hearing about the symptoms that are occurring.

Treating HE

HE is most often treated with Lactulose (a laxative that causes more frequent bowel movements that will help flush toxins from the body). Antibiotics are also prescribed to lessen the bacteria in the body that can produce harmful toxins.

Outlook for People with HE

HE does not get better on its own. It is important to talk to a doctor if you or a loved one starts to experience symptoms so that a treatment plan can be put in place. The goal of treatment is to slow the HE or stop it from getting worse and to avoid long-term hospitalization.

To learn more about HE, scan the QR code below. For a complete list of all of our free resources, please 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.

