Ascites due to Cirrhosis

What is ascites?

- Ascites is fluid within the abdomen (belly). The amount of fluid can vary.
- Sometimes there is swelling in the feet and legs (edema).
- Cirrhosis causes pressure to increase in the liver veins (portal hypertension) and causes fluid to leak into the abdomen.
- The belly fills up with fluid like a water balloon.
- Infection of the ascites is called SBP (spontaneous bacterial peritonitis) and can be life-threatening.

What are signs and symptoms of ascites?

- Weight gain despite loss of muscle mass
- Swollen belly on ultrasound or CT
- Shortness of breath because of belly pressure
- Hernias around the belly button (umbilical) or groin of ascites and diagnose SBP (inguinal) areas
- Abdominal discomfort
- Feeling full faster when eating (early satiety)
- Eating less because there is less room in the belly for food

What are signs and symptoms of SBP?

- Abdominal pain
- Fever, chills
- Confusion
- Decreased urine

How is ascites diagnosed?

- By physical exam and abdominal imaging (e.g., ultrasound or CT
- A sample of the fluid is tested to confirm the cause of ascites and diagnosis SBP

How is ascites managed and treated?

- Follow a low-salt (sodium) diet: no more than 2,000 mg/day
- Check food labels for sodium content and avoid salty food, pickles, canned or prepared food, take-out or fast food.
- Ask your health care provider before using a salt substitute
- A nutritionist may help you learn how to make healthy food choices
- You do not need to limit your fluid intake unless recommended by your health care provider.
- Take diuretics (water pills) as prescribed to get rid of excess fluid through frequent urination. Because they may harm your kidneys and cause other complications, you will need blood work to monitor for side effects.
  Medications used include:
  - Spironolactone
  - Furosemide
  - Eplerenone
  - Bumetanide

- Weigh yourself and record it.
  - Weigh yourself first thing in the morning after urinating
  - Be consistent with the amount of clothing you wear when weighing yourself
  - Your provider will recommend when to report weight changes (for example, if you are losing 1 pound or more per day, or if you are gaining more than 5 pounds in a week).
- Avoid further liver damage.
- Stop alcohol consumption.
- Get treatment for hepatitis B or C, if present.
- Paracentesis (tap) is performed by putting a needle through the skin into your belly to remove excess fluid.
  - A tap is performed when salt restriction and water pills are not enough.
  - The frequency of this procedure is determined by weight gain and level of discomfort. Abdominal paracentesis is a treatment for ascites but not a cure.
  - A diagnostic paracentesis (removal of small amount of fluid for testing) is needed when hospitalized or if there is suspicion of fluid infection (SBP).
  - If ascites is severe, a procedure called TIPS (transjugular
  - intrahepatic portosystemic shunt) can be considered. It is done by a radiologist who inserts a tube (stent) inside the liver.
  - This procedure is not safe for everyone, and the risks versus benefits need to be carefully discussed.

Seek immediate medical attention if you experience:

- Fever
- New belly pain
- Confusion
- Feeling short of breath
- Continuing weight gain
- Hernia that can no longer be reduced (pushed in)

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