Liver Cancer and Edema: Prevention and Management Techniques

by PATRICIA BRATIANU

Managing Liver Cancer and Edema

If you have liver cancer, you may experience swelling and abnormal accumulations of fluid. This condition is called edema, and we will discuss the connect between liver cancer and edema.

Edema may occur anyplace in your body, but common places for fluid to accumulate include your legs, feet, lower back and hands. Men may suffer from edema of the scrotum.

Edema may occur inside your body too. You may have fluid build up in your lungs or around your heart. An accumulation of fluid in your abdomen is called ascites and is a common problem for people who have liver cancer. You may have fluid build up in one area or throughout your body.

Generalized edema is a term which describes fluid buildup throughout your entire body.

Management of Edema

Edema affects many parts of the body, so management is complicated. A multifaceted approach is best. Talk with members of your healthcare team so that you receive the best treatment that modern medicine offers.

There are important steps you can take at home to prevent edema as well. If edema occurs, you will be ready to take steps to minimize fluid buildup and reduce risks of complications caused by swollen tissues.

Why Do People With Liver Cancer Get Edema?

There are several reasons why edema occurs when liver cancer is present, though some of the mechanisms are not fully understood.

When you have liver cancer, your liver cannot form albumin effectively. Albumin, a protein, is the same substance that comprises egg whites, and like egg whites the albumin in your body is thick and gel-like. Without the thickening effects of albumin, fluids leak out of your bloodstream into the tissues of your body.

Your kidneys produce a hormone called aldosterone. Aldosterone helps your body to reabsorb fluids from your kidneys by helping the body to reabsorb sodium. When your body reabsorbs sodium, it reabsorbs water too. When you have liver cancer, your liver does not use aldosterone properly, so levels of aldosterone rise in the bloodstream. The end result is impaired kidney function and further leakage of fluid into your tissues.

To complicate matters further, the actions of another hormone produced by the kidneys, ADH, antidiuretic hormone, are affected too. Again, the end result is fluid accumulation in the tissues.

What Causes Ascites?

All of the reasons given above create ascites. Additional mechanisms create fluid buildup in your abdomen. Due to liver damage, pressure within the main blood vessels of your liver increases. Through a series of complex mechanisms, plasma and other fluids leak out of your blood vessels. This fluid accumulates in your abdomen, causing ascites.

Lymphatic fluid also leaks from the surface of your liver, contributing to the buildup of fluid in your abdomen as well.

Managing Edema Through Diet

Check with your health care provider for specific recommendations, but here are some actions that are beneficial for most people diagnosed with liver cancer. The actions you take will need to be modified if you have advanced disease.

- **Eat a low sodium diet.** In general, you should limit your salt intake to between 250 milligrams to 500 milligrams per day. Keep in mind that much of the salt we eat comes from prepackaged and processed foods; not from salt that we add at the table. Baking soda, baking powder, smoked meats, pickles, bread and condiments contain high levels of sodium.
- **Read product labels carefully.** Opt for sodium-free or reduced sodium products.
- **See if your health care provider recommends the use of a salt substitute.** You can use healthier herbs and spices when cooking.
- **If you crave salt, eat some raw celery.** Celery contains sodium, but it is a healthy form that your body may utilize.
- **Consult with your dietitian on a regular basis.** Obtain lists of foods you should eat and those to avoid. Learn specific instructions regarding sodium, potassium, protein and fluids.
- **Consider making an appointment with an alternative health practitioner.** They can give you recommendations for herbs and other supplements to support liver health, facilitate elimination of excess fluids and provide nutritional support. Be sure that conventional and alternative practitioners are aware of all medications and supplements that you are taking.
- **Find out if your healthcare practitioner wants you to restrict your intake of fluids.** Be aware that carbonated beverages, such as soda and beer contain sodium. Avoid alcohol completely. Tomato and vegetable juices are high in sodium, but low sodium varieties are readily available.

Managing Edema at Home

There are strategies which you may use every day which reduce fluid accumulation, prevent complications and increase your comfort if you have edema. Here are some to put into practice:

- **Alternate periods of activity with rest.** There may be times that your healthcare provider recommends a period of bed rest. This can reduce stress on your liver and help the body get rid of excess fluids temporarily.
- **Take your medications as prescribed.** Get diagnostic tests as recommended by your physician so that medications are prescribed accurately.
- **Alternate periods of activity with rest.** There may be times that your health care provider recommends a period of bed rest. This can reduce stress on your liver and help the body get rid of excess fluids temporarily.
- **Change your position frequently.** Elevate your legs when you are sitting.
- **Seek medical attention promptly if you are having difficulty breathing**. If you experience chest tightness, pressure or wheezing, call 911.
- **Elevate parts of the body that are edematous.** If your skin is weeping, use reusable or disposable pads to absorb fluids.

How Your Doctor Can Help Your Liver Cancer and Edema

Several medications are used to help manage edema. Diuretics are the most commonly prescribed medications used to help your body get rid of excess fluids.

Due to your illness, you are likely to have low levels of potassium. Unfortunately, most diuretics cause further loss of potassium. Your healthcare prescriber is likely to treat you with diuretics and potassium supplements.

Medications may be prescribed to help reduce the pressure the blood vessels of your liver. Sometimes albumin is administered. Your healthcare provider may also prescribe nutritional supplements. If you have difficulty breathing, due to fluid buildup, your healthcare provider may prescribe medications, including narcotics that open up the airways and provide relief.

Sometimes medications are administered to promote relaxation. Being filled with fluid is uncomfortable and as a result your sleep may be impaired. While sedatives do not relieve fluid, they may reduce your suffering by allowing you to rest.

Some people need medication to relieve itching. Tense, weeping skin may occur when edema is pronounced and itchiness is common. Topical and internal medicines may provide relief of itchiness.

You may need oxygen if your lungs or heart are edematous. Oxygen will make you feel comfortable and decrease physical stress on your body. Fortunately, portable units are readily available.

Because liver cancer and edema are complex conditions, treatment approaches vary greatly, and the products used depends upon your individual needs. There are many effective tools available that can help you.

Does Paracentesis Help Ascites?

If you have ascites, your doctor may recommend that you undergo a procedure called paracentesis, in which a tube is inserted into the abdomen to drain off excess fluid. This can relieve abdominal discomfort and make breathing easier. While it provides relief in the short run paracentesis is not a cure for ascites or liver cancer.

Some practitioners believe that repeated draining of fluid from the abdomen only increases the rate of fluid accumulation. Discuss the pros and cons thoroughly with your healthcare provider if you suffer from ascites and are considering undergoing paracentesis.

Liver Cancer and Edema: The Bottom Line

Management of edema is likely to be one of the biggest challenges that you will face if you have liver cancer. There are many actions you can take to minimize edema, but it takes an entire team to manage edema and liver cancer well.

Work with your medical professionals, consider alternative treatments and elicit help from your family and community. You are in charge. Use every resource that you have to ensure that edema and liver cancer does not prohibit you from living well today.