Ascites

Ascites is a gathering of fluid in the belly (*abdomen*). This is most often caused by liver disease. It may also be caused by a number of other less common problems. It causes a ballooning out *(distension*) of the abdomen.

CAUSES

Scarring of the liver (*cirrhosis*) is the most common cause of ascites. Other causes include:

- Infection or inflammation in the abdomen.
- Cancer in the abdomen.
- Congestive heart failure (CHF).
- Certain forms of kidney failure (nephritic syndrome).
- Inflammation of the pancreas.
- Clots in the veins of the liver.

SYMPTOMS

In the early stages of ascites, you may not have any symptoms. The main symptom of ascites is a sense of abdominal bloating. This is due to the presence of fluid. This may also cause an increase in abdominal or waist size. People with this condition can develop swelling in the legs, and men can develop a swollen scrotum. When there is a lot of fluid, it may be hard to breath. Stretching of the abdomen by fluid can be painful.

DIAGNOSIS

Certain features of your medical history, such as a history of liver disease and of an enlarging abdomen, can suggest the presence of ascites. The diagnosis of ascites can be made on physical exam by your caregiver. An abdominal ultrasound examination can confirm that ascites is present, and estimate the amount of fluid.

Once ascites is confirmed, it is important to determine its cause. Again, a history of one of the conditions listed in “CAUSES” provides a strong clue. A physical exam is important, and blood and x-ray tests may be needed. During a procedure called *paracentesis*, a sample of fluid is removed from the abdomen. This can determine certain key features about the fluid, such as whether or not infection or cancer is present. Your caregiver will determine if a paracentesis is necessary. They will describe the procedure to you.

PREVENTION

Ascites is a complication of other conditions. Therefore to prevent ascites, you must seek treatment for any significant health conditions you have. Once ascites is present, careful attention to fluid and salt intake may help prevent it from getting worse (see TREATMENT, below). If you have ascites, you should not drink alcohol.

PROGNOSIS

The prognosis of ascites depends on the underlying disease. If the disease is reversible, such as with certain infections or with heart failure, then ascites may improve or disappear. When ascites is caused by cirrhosis, then it indicates that the liver disease has worsened, and further evaluation and treatment of the liver disease is needed. If your ascites is caused by cancer, then the success or failure of the cancer treatment will determine whether your ascites will improve or worsen.

RISKS AND COMPLICATIONS

Ascites is likely to worsen if it is not properly diagnosed and treated. A large amount of ascites can cause pain and difficulty breathing. The main complication, besides worsening, is infection (called *spontaneous bacterial peritonitis*). This requires prompt treatment.

TREATMENT

The treatment of ascites depends on its cause. When liver disease is your cause, medical management using water pills (*diuretics*) and decreasing salt intake is often effective. Ascites due to peritoneal inflammation or

malignancy (*cancer*) alone does not respond to salt restriction and diuretics. Hospitalization is sometimes required.

If the treatment of ascites cannot be managed with medications, a number of other treatments are available. Your caregivers will help you decide which will work best for you. Some of these are:

- Removal of fluid from the abdomen (paracentesis).
- Fluid from the abdomen is passed into a vein (peritoneo-venous shunting).
- Liver transplantation.
- Transjugular intrahepatic portosystemic stent shunt.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

It is important to monitor body weight and the intake and output of fluids. Weigh yourself at the same time every day. Record your weights. Fluid restriction may be necessary. It is also important to know your salt intake. The more salt you take in, the more fluid you will retain. Ninety percent of people with ascites respond to this approach.

- Follow any directions for medications carefully.
- Follow-up with your caregiver, as directed.
- Be sure to report any changes in your health, especially any new or worsening symptoms.
- If your ascites is from liver disease, you should avoid alcohol and other substances toxic to the liver.

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

- Your weight increases more than a few pounds in a few days.
- You abdominal or waist size increases.
- You develop swelling in your legs.
- If you had swelling and it worsens.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You develop a fever.
- You develop new abdominal pain.
- You develop difficulty breathing.
- You develop confusion.
- You have bleeding from the mouth, stomach, or rectum.

MAKE SURE YOU:

- Understand these instructions.
- Will watch your condition.
- Will get help right away if you are not doing well or get worse.

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