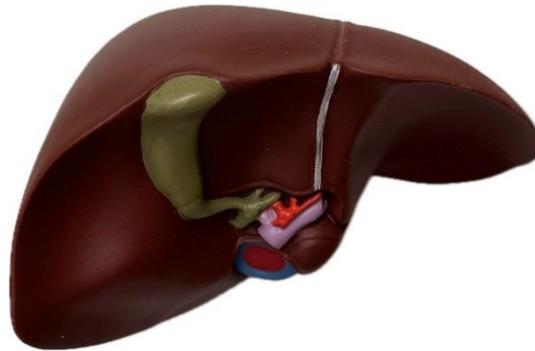


# Diet and liver cirrhosis

## A patient's guide



### Introduction

- People with liver disease (cirrhosis) need more energy and protein in their diet and need to eat more regularly than those with a healthy liver. Why?
- Your liver has many important jobs. One of them is to help your body digest and store carbohydrates, which are a key source of energy.
- Your body needs energy all the time to keep working properly, to do things like breathing and keeping your heart beating.
- After you eat, your body can use the energy from food for about two hours. After that, it usually gets energy from stores in your liver.
- If you have cirrhosis, your liver doesn't work as well, so it can't store or process carbohydrates as it should. This means that after two hours without food, your body can't get energy from the liver.

- Instead, it starts to use your muscles and fat for energy. This can make you lose weight and muscle without trying, which can make you feel weaker and make daily activities harder.
- If you have cirrhosis, especially decompensated cirrhosis (a severe stage of liver disease), fluid can build up around your legs and stomach. This fluid can hide weight loss, so even if the number on the weighing scale doesn't change, you could still be losing muscle.
- A dietitian may check your muscle strength by measuring your handgrip (see image below). Handgrip strength is not affected by fluid and helps to check your muscle strength.



- A high-energy, high-protein diet and regular eating pattern can help prevent weight and muscle loss.
- It can also help you regain weight and strength if you've already lost weight. This booklet is here to guide you in making the right dietary changes to achieve this.

## Nutritional advice for managing liver cirrhosis

- **Eat a meal or snack containing starchy carbohydrate every 2-3 hours.** This keeps your body supplied with energy and stops it from using your muscles for fuel.

**Examples of starchy foods:** Bread (sliced bread, pittas, rolls, chapati – wholegrain, sourdough, and seeded are best), cereals (Weetabix, Bran Flakes, muesli), oats, pasta, noodles, rice, grains (bulgur wheat, couscous, quinoa), and potatoes (including sweet potato and yam).

- **Eat a carbohydrate-rich snack before bed.** Your body needs energy while you sleep. Eating a carbohydrate-rich snack (see the table later in this leaflet) before bed gives your body the energy it needs until breakfast.
- **Eat 3-4 protein-rich foods each day.** You need more protein than someone with a healthy liver. Protein helps build and repair muscles. A high-protein diet can help reduce muscle loss and rebuild muscle.

**Examples of protein foods:** Meat (beef, lamb, pork) and poultry (chicken, turkey), fish (white fish - cod, haddock, oily fish - salmon, mackerel), dairy (cheese, Greek yogurt, milk), eggs, beans, lentils, tofu/tempeh, Quorn.

- **Exercise regularly (if safe for you).** If your doctor says it's okay, regular resistance-based exercise can help you keep your muscles strong. Resistance exercises are activities that get your muscles to work against a force, like weights, resistance bands, or your own body weight, to build strength.
- **Follow a 'no added salt' diet.** Salt can make your body hold onto fluid, so reducing salt can help prevent fluid buildup.
  - A 'no added salt' diet means not adding salt to your food while cooking or at the table. It also means avoiding canned and processed foods, ready meals, salty snacks, sauces, and cured meats, or choosing low-salt options instead.
- **Eat a variety of foods from all food groups to ensure your body gets all the nutrition it needs.** Include fruit and vegetables, protein, carbohydrates, dairy or alternatives, and healthy fats like oils and spreads in your diet.

## Food examples

### Bedtime snack ideas (50g carbohydrate)

Type	Snack	Details
Savoury Snacks	<b>Pitta Bread with Dip</b>	1.5 large pitta breads or 1 large flatbread with 3 tbsp hummus or 4 tbsp tzatziki
	<b>Milk and Scone</b>	200ml plain milk with a plain or cheese scone
	<b>Cereal with Milk</b>	Bowl of cereal (3 Weetabix or 50g Malted wheats, Multigrain hoops, Cornflakes) with 200ml milk
	<b>Rice Cakes with Peanut Butter</b>	6 rice cakes with 2 tbsp peanut butter
	<b>Toast or Bagel with Avocado</b>	2 slices thick toast or 1 medium bagel with ½ large avocado mashed on top
	<b>Crackers with Cheese and Pickle</b>	5-6 plain or seeded crackers with matchbox-sized cheese and 1 tbsp pickle
Sweet Snacks	<b>Yogurt with Banana and Honey</b>	125g yogurt with 1 banana and 1 tbsp honey
	<b>Bagel or Toast with Spread</b>	1 medium bagel, 2 thick toast slices, or 2 crumpets with butter / margarine / nut butter + honey/jam
	<b>Cold Nourishing Drink with Snack</b>	200ml flavoured milk (e.g., Nesquik, Crusha, Yazoo, chocolate milk) / fruit juice / smoothie with a large banana, cereal bar, 2-3 biscuits, or toast with butter/nut butter
	<b>Hot Nourishing Drink with Snack</b>	Hot chocolate / malted milk (200ml) with a large banana, 2-3 biscuits, cereal bar or 1 slice of toast with butter / nut butter

## Ideas to reduce your salt intake

- Do not add salt to your food when cooking or at the table.
- Use other flavours like herbs, spices, lemon, lime, or vinegar instead of salt.
- **Watch out for processed foods** as they often have more salt. Try to eat less of these, and when you do buy them, look for low-salt options. Check for the **green label** on the package for **lower salt content**.
- **Avoid salt substitutes like "reduced sodium salt"** – they still add to your salt intake.

## Suggestions for a small appetite

- **Choose full-fat dairy products** and avoid foods labelled as low-fat.
- **Choose nourishing drinks** like milk, milky coffee/tea, flavoured milk or milkshakes, over-the-counter nourishing drinks (e.g., Aldi Pro Milk, Arla Protein Drink, Complian, Horlicks Healthy Body, Huel), hot chocolate, and smoothies instead of water or black tea/coffee.
- **Add high-calorie foods to your meals and snacks** to boost your energy intake.

### Examples:

- Add cheese to soup, sandwiches, potatoes, or vegetables.
- Spread butter or margarine on sandwiches, vegetables, and potatoes.
- Sprinkle nuts or seeds on cereal, porridge, ice cream, or soup.
- Add nut butter to toast or porridge.
- Drizzle olive oil over your food before serving.

## Example Meal Plan

Meal	Options (choose one)
<b>Breakfast</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Porridge with milk, fruit, honey and nuts/seeds</li> <li>• Toast with eggs, nut butter &amp; banana, or baked beans</li> <li>• Wholegrain cereal with milk and fruit</li> </ul>
<b>Morning Snack</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plain biscuits, chocolate bar or slice of cake</li> <li>• High protein yoghurt (Greek or Icelandic style) with fruit</li> <li>• Cheese &amp; crackers</li> <li>• Nourishing drink (milky coffee, hot chocolate, milkshake, smoothie)</li> <li>• Unsalted nuts or trail mix</li> <li>• Toast with nut butter or jam</li> </ul> <p><b>TIP:</b> Pair a nourishing drink with a snack for more energy and protein</p>
<b>Lunch</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sandwich or wrap with protein (chicken, tuna, eggs, or cheese) and salad</li> <li>• Jacket potato with protein (e.g., tuna, beans, or cheese) and salad</li> <li>• Salad with protein (chicken, fish, cheese), starchy carbohydrate (grains, rice, pasta) and leafy greens (e.g., spinach)</li> </ul>
<b>Afternoon Snack</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• See morning snack list</li> </ul>
<b>Evening Meal</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chicken, lean meat, or fish with potatoes (mashed, boiled, or roasted in olive/rapeseed oil), rice, or pasta, paired with stir-fried, roasted, or olive oil-drizzled vegetables or a salad</li> <li>• Chicken, lean meat, fish, or a lentil/pulse-based stew or curry served with rice, chapati, or roti and vegetables</li> <li>• Pasta with a protein-rich sauce (e.g., lentil or lean meat Bolognese), topped with cheese and served with vegetables or salad</li> </ul>
<b>Bedtime Snack</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choose from list on page 3</li> </ul>

## Notes

### Contact our service

Nutrition and Dietetic Services  
Tel: 020 7288 5552

### Contact our Trust

If you have a compliment, complaint or concern, please contact our Patient advice and liaison service (PALS) on **020 7288 5551** or [whh-tr.PALS@nhs.net](mailto:whh-tr.PALS@nhs.net).

If you need a large print, audio or translated copy of this leaflet, please email [whh-tr.patient-information@nhs.net](mailto:whh-tr.patient-information@nhs.net). We will try our best to meet your needs.

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