

Sarcoidosis of the Liver, or ‘hepatic sarcoidosis’, affects the majority of patients with sarcoidosis (up to 70%). However most of these patients rarely or never show symptoms in the liver. Patients newly diagnosed with sarcoidosis should ask their GP or consultant to check for any signs of liver sarcoidosis.

Symptoms

Symptoms occur in about 20% of patients affected by liver sarcoidosis.

Symptoms:

- abdominal pain
- itchy skin
- fever
- weight loss
- hepatomegaly (enlargement of the liver, in up to 20% of patients)
- jaundice (yellow skin, in less than 5% patients)

Diagnosis

Sarcoidosis of the liver will usually be picked up when testing for sarcoidosis in other parts of the body. Investigations will use one or a combination of the tests below:

- hepatic function test
- liver biopsy
- CT scan

The outlook

Most patients with liver sarcoidosis have a mild form of the disease and do not require treatment.

However, treatment with corticosteroids may be necessary for advanced cases. This can improve liver function tests and help alleviate symptoms. All patients with cirrhosis should be referred to a liver specialist or gastroenterologist.

Liver transplantation is a valid option in patients with advanced liver disease.

Rare conditions

In some rare and chronic cases, liver sarcoidosis can manifest as other conditions.

These include:

- chronic cholestasis
- portal hypertension
- cirrhosis

Chronic cholestasis

Patients with advanced hepatic sarcoidosis may develop a chronic cholestatic syndrome. This is where bile cannot flow from the liver to the intestine.

Symptoms:

- jaundice
- fever
- malaise
- weight loss
- anorexia
- pruritus (itchy skin)

Diagnosis: Cholestatic pattern of abnormal liver function tests.

Treatment: There are limited treatment options. Corticosteroids in doses of 30 to 40 mg/day of prednisone may improve symptoms, lower serum ALP and GGT levels and improve hepatomegaly. Ursodeoxycholic acid may improve liver function tests.

Portal hypertension

Portal hypertension is an increase in blood pressure in the veins around the liver. This condition often develops with hepatic sarcoidosis as a result of biliary fibrosis or cirrhosis.

Symptoms:

- ascites (fluid in the abdomen)
- bleeding from dilated blood vessels (varices) in the gastro-intestinal (GI) tract

Diagnosis: Abdominal ultrasound and upper GI endoscopy.

Treatment: Diuretics may be given for ascites. Betablockers can help reduce the pressure in the portal venous system. For bleeding varices, therapeutic endoscopy is required.

Cirrhosis

Cirrhosis is advanced scarring (fibrosis) of the liver which is usually permanent. This occurs in less than 1% of liver sarcoidosis cases.

Symptoms:

- fatigue
- bleeding and bruising easily
- itchy skin
- jaundice
- ascites
- loss of appetite
- confusion (hepatic encephalopathy)

Treatment: Standard treatment of cirrhosis and its complications.