

# Ascites (Excessive abdominal fluid)

## What is ascites?

Ascites is a symptom of cancer, usually associated with cancer of the breast, lung, large bowel, (colon), stomach, pancreas, ovary, womb and the peritoneum. It can also be caused by other conditions, such as advanced liver disease.

The lining of the abdomen has two layers, one lines the abdominal wall and the other covers the organs inside the abdomen. This lining produces a fluid that acts as a lubricant and allows the abdominal organs to glide smoothly over one another. Sometimes too much of the fluid can build up between the two layers, and this is called ascites.

## Symptoms of ascites

The abdomen gradually becomes swollen and distended, which can be uncomfortable or painful. It may cause you to feel or be sick and you may feel tired and breathless. You might experience indigestion, reduced appetite, a feeling of fullness or constipation. Ascites can make it difficult for you to get comfortable, sit up or walk.

## Treatment of ascites

To help relieve these symptoms, the ascitic fluid can be drained by inserting a tube into the abdomen. This is called paracentesis.

If the clinical team caring for you think this might help you, you will be assessed, which may include arranging repeat blood tests. You might be required to have an ultrasound scan. The procedure will be explained to you and you can ask any questions.

## Where can I have the treatment?

The clinical team will discuss with you, where it is possible for your treatment to take place and where they feel would be best for you.

## Procedure

Once you're lying down comfortably, the skin in the area where the drain is to be inserted is cleaned. The doctor will give you an injection of local anaesthetic to numb the area and prevent the procedure from being painful.

A small cut is made in the skin of the abdomen and a thin tube, called a cannula, inserted. This is attached to a drainage bag. The fluid that drains out of the abdomen is collected in the bag.

The length of time that the tube needs to stay in place depends on the amount of fluid that needs to be drained. The drain is usually in place for a few hours but may be in place for up to 24 hours, or longer.

If any fluid is leaking after the drain has been removed, the site will be covered by a dressing or drainage bag until it heals.

The fluid can build up again, and drainage may need to be carried out more than once. If the fluid builds up again quickly, your hospital oncology doctor may arrange for a long-term tube to be inserted into the abdomen.

## Possible problems with ascitic drainage

The fluid is usually drained off slowly, as a sudden release of pressure in the abdomen can cause blood pressure to drop. This may make you feel faint or light-headed. Your blood pressure will be checked during the procedure. The drain site can become infected which may be indicated by a high temperature.

## Other ways to treat ascites

Sometimes a water tablet (diuretic) is prescribed. This may make you want to pass more urine than normal, but it can help by slowing down the build-up of ascitic fluid.

If you would like a copy of our Statement of Purpose that gives a full explanation of the services we offer, it is available on request.

---

North London Hospice  
47 Woodside Avenue  
London N12 8TT  
(For Sat Nav use N12 8TF)

Phone: 020 8343 8841  
Fax: 020 8343 7672

Email: [nlh@northlondonhospice.co.uk](mailto:nlh@northlondonhospice.co.uk)  
[www.northlondonhospice.org](http://www.northlondonhospice.org)

NORTH·LONDON  
HOSPICE

Serving the Boroughs of Barnet, Enfield & Haringey

Registered Charity No. 285300