

Patient education: Hepatic encephalopathy (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

What is hepatic encephalopathy? — Hepatic encephalopathy is a condition that causes confusion and other thinking problems. It can also cause changes in a person's mood, sleeping patterns, and body movements.

What causes hepatic encephalopathy? — Most people who get this condition also have a type of liver disease called "cirrhosis." In people with cirrhosis, hepatic encephalopathy can be caused by:

- Bleeding in the stomach, intestines, or other parts of the digestive tract ([figure 1](#))
- An infection
- Changes in diet
- Constipation
- Taking certain medicines
- Worsening of the liver disease

What are the symptoms of hepatic encephalopathy? — Symptoms include:

- Being confused
- Memory problems
- Mood changes
- Trouble speaking, drawing, and writing clearly
- Problems with sleep – Some people have trouble falling asleep. Others sleep too much.
- Moving more slowly than normal
- Flapping hands

People with hepatic encephalopathy usually have symptoms of serious liver disease, too. These include:

- A swollen belly and legs
- Fluid buildup in the lungs, which can cause trouble breathing
- Yellow skin and a yellow tint to the whites of the eyes – This is called "jaundice."
- Red palms
- Shrunken muscles
- Tiny blood vessels that can be seen just under the skin
- Bad breath

Is there a test for hepatic encephalopathy? — Yes. Doctors can do many different tests. Some are used to make sure you do not have problem besides hepatic encephalopathy. The tests include:

- Blood tests
- Tests for your memory and thinking – The doctor or nurse will ask some questions to check your memory and thinking. For example, the doctor might have you do simple number and word tests.
- An EEG – This test measures electrical activity in your brain and records your brain wave patterns.

- A CT or MRI scan of your brain – These are imaging tests that can create pictures of your brain.

How is hepatic encephalopathy treated? — The treatment depends on what is causing the problem.

Treatment can include:

- Taking medicine to treat an infection
- Taking medicine to have more bowel movements
- Changing your diet
- Stopping medicines that might be causing the problem

Can hepatic encephalopathy be prevented? — You can lower your chances of getting hepatic encephalopathy by asking your doctor or nurse what types of foods you should eat. You should also always check with your doctor or nurse before starting any new medicines.

More on this topic

[Patient education: Cirrhosis \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: EEG \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Evaluating memory and thinking problems \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: GI bleed \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Liver cancer \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Cirrhosis \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

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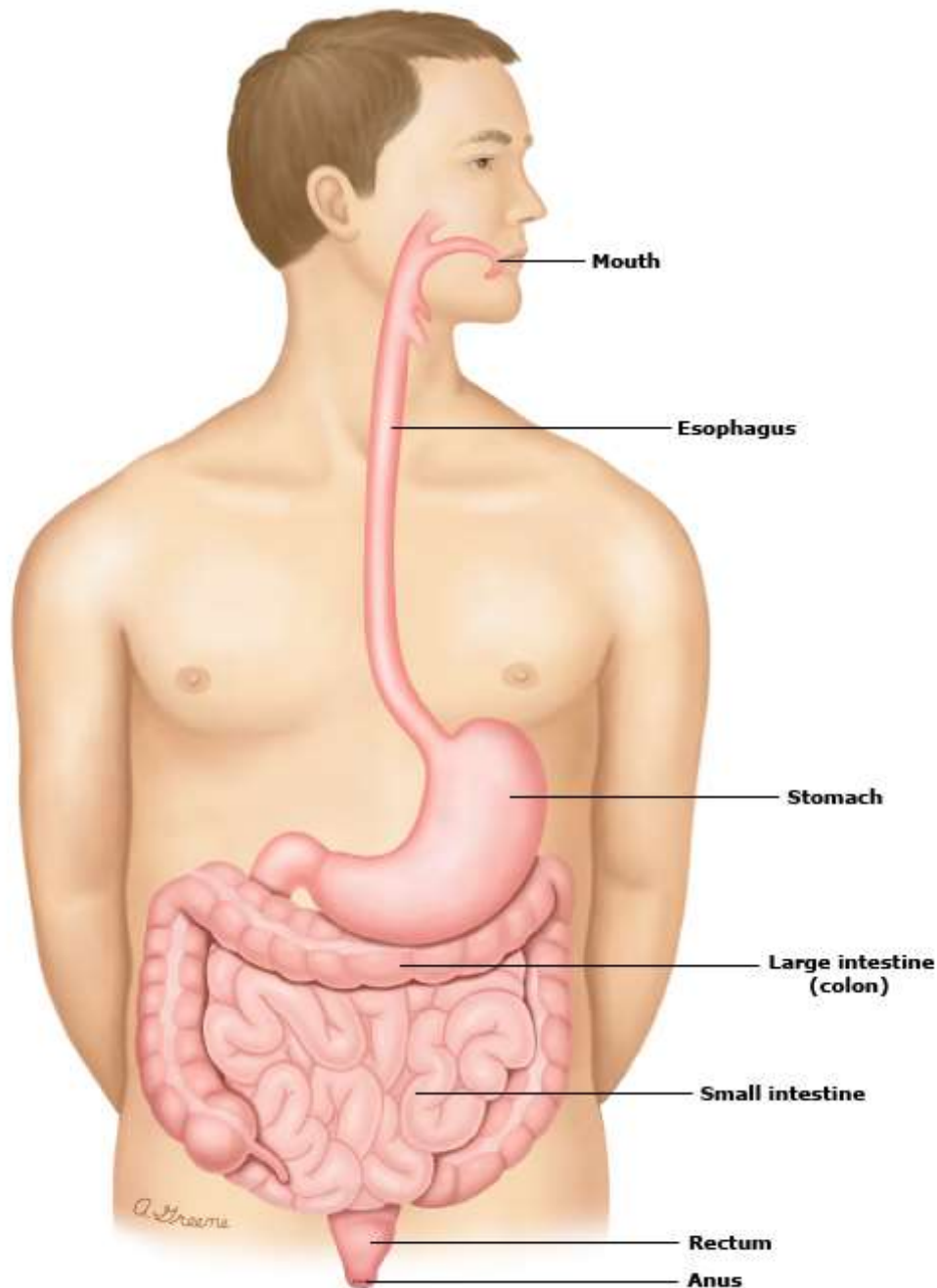
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GRAPHICS

Digestive system



This drawing shows the organs in the body that process food. Together these organs are called "the digestive system," or "digestive tract." As food travels through this system, the body absorbs nutrients and water.

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