

# Understanding hepatic encephalopathy

## Patient information



TIME TO  
DELIVER

European Liver  
Patients Association

ELPA



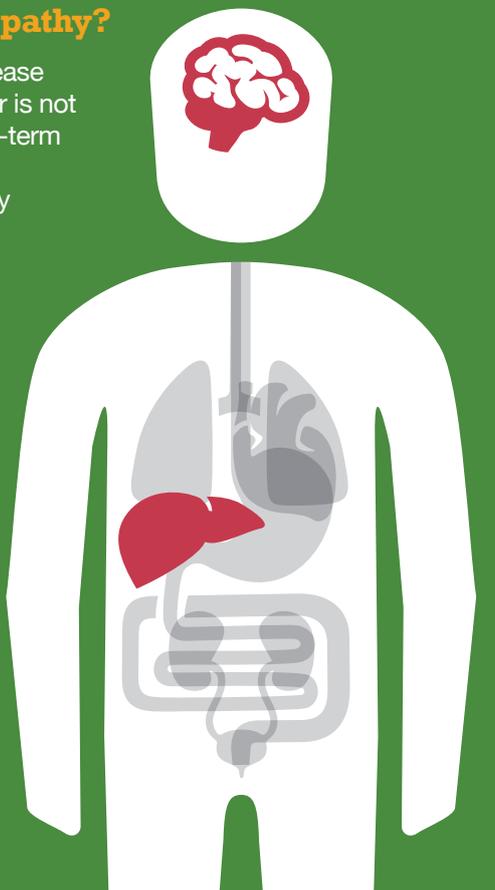
### What is hepatic encephalopathy?

Hepatic encephalopathy (HE) is a disease that can develop when a person's liver is not working properly. It can be either long-term (chronic) or short-term (acute) and its symptoms can range from mild to very severe. 200,000 people are living with HE across the EU.<sup>1</sup>

The liver is the largest internal organ in the human body. It performs hundreds of important functions, such as removing unwanted substances (toxins) from the body.

Long-term damage to the liver can lead to advanced liver disease, known as cirrhosis. Cirrhosis stops the liver from fully functioning.

HE is a serious complication of cirrhosis. It occurs when a person's liver is no longer able to remove toxins from their blood, and they enter the brain, causing a range of symptoms that affect a person's physical and mental health.



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### What are the symptoms of hepatic encephalopathy?

Every person living with HE is affected in different ways. Many people experience a combination of mental or physical symptoms, including:<sup>1,2</sup>

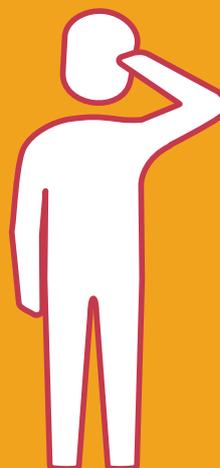
#### Mental

- Forgetfulness
- Reduced ability to concentrate
- Poor judgment
- Apathy and irritability
- Disorientation and confusion
- Inappropriate behavior and personality change
- Hallucinations



#### Physical

- Sleep problems
- Lethargy
- Difficulty speaking or writing
- Poor co-ordination
- Bad breath
- Flapping tremor in the hands
- Loss of consciousness
- Coma



HE is sometimes not identified by medical professionals. It is therefore always important to tell any healthcare professional about your HE diagnosis.

Symptoms of HE can quickly change or worsen. If this happens, you must speak to your healthcare professional as soon as you begin to notice anything different.

### Tanya's story



Initially, Tanya just felt 'on edge'. Her symptoms slowly worsened and her ability to focus on simple tasks became very difficult. She started to forget things and got confused by basic tasks. Tanya, who was 36 years old, was scared and frustrated, and didn't know why she was finding life and work so difficult.

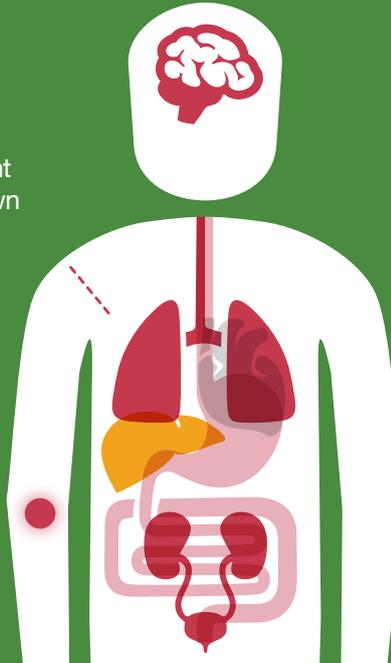
A few months after she started treatment for HE, she began to notice a significant improvement. Her sleeping gradually returned to normal and her ability to understand and carry out daily tasks improved. This has resulted in increased motivation and an improved work-life balance and enabled her to repair her relationships with family.

(Adapted from ELPA, Time to DeLiver, 2015)

## What might cause my symptoms?

The symptoms of HE may not be visible all the time. Instead, they may be brought on by a number of different causes known as 'precipitating factors' which most commonly include:<sup>2</sup>

- some neurological medicines
- dehydration
- surgery
- low oxygen levels in the body
- gastrointestinal bleeding
- kidney problems
- constipation
- infection



## Where can I find help and support?

### British Liver Trust

[www.britishlivertrust.org.uk](http://www.britishlivertrust.org.uk)  
01425 481 320

### Liver4life

[www.liver4life.org.uk](http://www.liver4life.org.uk)  
0800 074 3494

### Children's Liver Disease Foundation

[www.childliverdisease.org](http://www.childliverdisease.org)  
0121 212 3839



## How can HE be treated?

It is possible to treat HE but each patient's individual treatment may be different. The treatment will depend on the seriousness of the symptoms and causes. The personal circumstances of the patient can also play a part.

When discussing treatment options, you should share as much relevant information with your healthcare professionals as possible.

For many people living with HE, identifying what 'precipitating factor' is causing the episodes is very important. By taking treatment that stops or manages the precipitating factor, it is possible to limit HE symptoms.

A number of medicines also exist which can help stop HE episodes returning. These treatments are designed to help reduce the production of the harmful substances, and their absorption into the bloodstream. All medicines have certain side effects and should only be used on the instruction and under the supervision of your healthcare professional.

With continuous treatment, HE can be controlled and sometimes even stopped. However, cirrhosis, the underlying condition of HE, cannot be reversed without a liver transplant.

**With continuous treatment, HE can be controlled and sometimes even stopped**



## There are two possible ways of treating HE:



Treatment to limit or stop the 'precipitating factor' which trigger symptoms



Treatment for HE to help reduce the production of toxins and the way they are absorbed into the blood

## About us

This resource has been created by the European Liver Patients Association (ELPA) as part of our campaign, *Time to DeLiver*. The campaign aims to raise awareness of, and change attitudes to, HE across Europe. The *Time to Deliver: Getting a Grip on HE* report is available here: <http://bit.ly/25wFadh>

For more information on ELPA and our *Time to DeLiver* campaign, visit [www.elpa-info.org](http://www.elpa-info.org) or contact us at [contact@elpa-info.org](mailto:contact@elpa-info.org)