

# Swelling tummy (ascites)

Inside the tummy (abdomen), there is a membrane called the peritoneum. It has 2 layers. One of these layers covers the organs inside the tummy. The other layer lines the tummy wall. Sometimes fluid can build up between the two layers. This is called [ascites](#).

Ascites can develop if cancer cells are irritating the lining of the tummy, causing it to make too much fluid. It can also develop if cancer has spread to the liver, or if the liver is damaged. You may also get swelling if lymph nodes in the tummy are blocked.

As well as swelling in the tummy, ascites can cause:

- pain and discomfort
- sickness (nausea)
- indigestion and constipation
- tiredness and weakness (fatigue)
- breathlessness
- loss of appetite
- needing to pee (pass urine) more often
- difficulty sitting comfortably and moving around.

## How ascites can be managed

- If you have swelling in your tummy, tell your cancer doctor or nurse. They will arrange tests to find the cause and discuss the best way to manage it.
- Your doctor may suggest putting a tube (catheter) into the tummy to drain the extra fluid. This is called [ascitic drainage](#). The fluid is drained over a few hours. You may be able to go home the same day, or you may have to stay in hospital overnight.
- The catheter can become blocked. If it does, changing your position or sitting upright may help clear it.
- Tell the nurse or doctor if you have any pain or discomfort. They can give you painkillers.
- Fluid can build up again, so you may need to have it drained more than once. If this happens, sometimes doctors may suggest putting in a drain that stays in for longer.
- Anti-cancer treatments such as [chemotherapy](#) or [targeted therapy](#) can help reduce the number of cancer cells. This can sometimes improve ascites.
- Your doctor may give you a water tablet (diuretic). It may help the body get rid of excess fluid as pee (urine) and can help slow down the build-up of fluid. They may also suggest reducing the amount of salt in your diet.
- Occasionally a tube called a shunt can be placed inside your tummy. It drains the fluid into a large vein. A doctor can put in this shunt using a sedative, which makes you drowsy. Or they may put you under a general anaesthetic.

## Macmillan Cancer Support resources

We have more information on our [website](#), including audiobooks. Or you can order our free booklets and leaflets on [be.macmillan.org.uk](http://be.macmillan.org.uk) such as:

- [Controlling the symptoms of cancer](#)
- [Understanding secondary cancer in the liver](#)

We produce information in a [range of formats](#) and [languages](#). To order these, visit our website or call our support line.

## Further Macmillan support

If you have more questions or would like to talk to someone, call the Macmillan Support Line free on **0808 808 00 00**, 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm. Or visit [macmillan.org.uk](http://macmillan.org.uk) where you can [chat to us online](#).

Deaf or hard of hearing? Call using NGT (Text Relay) on **18001 0808 808 00 00**, or use the NGT Lite app. Speak another language? Telephone interpreters are available. Please tell us in English the language you would like to use.

Or if you want to share your experiences or ask questions, you can find others who understand on our [Online Community](#).

## Other useful contact details

- The British Liver Trust – visit [www.britishlivertrust.org.uk](http://www.britishlivertrust.org.uk) or call 0800 652 7330

## Notes and questions

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