Acute Cholangitis

What is a cholangitis attack?

Cholangitis attacks (or flares) may occur in people with PSC, even in those with otherwise good liver function. The exact cause is not known but is thought to be the result of an infection of the bile ducts within the liver.

Important

- Acute cholangitis attacks can present with a broad range of symptoms
- The classic features of infection can be absent
- Blood markers of infection (white blood cell count, CRP and bilirubin) may also be normal
- Acute cholangitis attacks in PSC are not always associated with the presence of stones (calculi).

Presentation of acute cholangitis attacks

Often, symptoms are non-specific, including (but not limited to):
- A feeling of being run down
- New or worsening pain in the right upper quadrant
- Reduced appetite
- New or worsening itch (particularly on the palms or soles).

In more severe cases, the patient may look jaundiced, have a fever, notice darkening of their urine +/- pale stools, or simply manifest sudden deterioration in their liver biochemistry.

Treatment of bacterial cholangitis

The UK-PSC consortium advises that antibiotics targeting the most common bacterial culprits be used in the first instance. Common first-line agents include:
- Ciprofloxacin
- Co-amoxiclav
- Co-trimoxazole

Unfortunately, there is currently no good evidence to indicate how long antibiotics should be continued for, but approximately 2-3 weeks is the standard duration.

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Do I need medical attention?

Yes. If you think you are having a cholangitis attack, urgent medical attention is required. Contact your GP or out of hours medical provider for an urgent appointment about your suspected cholangitis attack (bile duct infection). Treatment may be required even if you don’t have the severe signs and symptoms.

If any of the following signs or symptoms of severe cholangitis are present, then it is advisable to attend your local accident and emergency department immediately:
- Sudden onset of jaundice
- Severe pain in the right upper part of your abdomen
- Unbearable fever (for instance, not controlled with paracetamol)
- Light-headedness/dizziness
- Chills
- Loss of consciousness

If you have severe cholangitis, you may need to be treated and monitored in hospital.

Cholangitis attacks: top tips

- Keep a note of all your symptoms and how long you have had them.
- Get an urgent appointment with a medical professional. If in doubt, seek medical advice early.
- Expect to have an urgent blood test.
- Expect to be given antibiotics.
- Contact your usual PSC doctor immediately. If you are at all unsure of your treatment or care.
- Always let your PSC doctor know that you have had a cholangitis attack.

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