The UW Health transplant team helps you reach and keep long-term health goals. To promote this, patients with liver disease must not use alcohol or drugs. We will do what we can to help you reach this goal.

What does alcohol do to the liver?

The liver breaks down alcohol so it can be removed from your body. If you drink more than the liver can process, it can cause permanent damage to the liver. This leads to fatty liver, acute hepatitis, and after time cirrhosis. The only cure for cirrhosis is a liver transplant.
Why do I need to stop drinking alcohol?

For people with liver disease, even small amounts of alcohol can make the liver disease worse. For this reason you should stop drinking alcohol. Alcohol includes beer, wine, and hard liquor. We also recommend you do not drink non-alcoholic (“NA”) beer.

Can I have a liver transplant if I have liver disease from alcohol use?

You will meet with members of the transplant team who help to decide if you can have a liver transplant. In order to have a liver transplant, you must agree to stop drinking alcohol for the rest of your life. They assess your ability to do this.

Here are some of the facts the transplant team uses to decide if you can have a transplant:
- Did you follow the advice of your doctor to stop drinking?
- How long it has been since you stopped drinking?
- Have you gone to a treatment program or gotten counseling?
- Do you have a support person that can help you abstain from alcohol?
- Does or has alcohol use had a negative effect on your life?
- Have you kept your doctor’s visits?
- Have you have followed instructions from your doctors, treatment staff, or counselors?
- Do you understand the role alcohol has played in your liver disease?

Before you can be put on the waiting list the transplant team may require:
- That you show a period of time that you can avoid alcohol totally.
- That you attend treatment or counseling. They may call your counselor to discuss your progress and attendance.
- That you bring a support person with you to your transplant clinic visits.
- That you have random blood or urine tests done to check for any alcohol or drug use.

What happens when I am waiting for a liver transplant?

You must go on to show us that you are committed to avoid alcohol for the rest of your life. If you drink alcohol while waiting for a transplant, you will be put on an INACTIVE status (meaning you cannot get a transplant), for a period of time (most often, at least twelve months). The transplant team reviews your case and makes this decision. The transplant team develops a treatment plan for you to follow, which often includes having random blood and urine tests done. You must follow the treatment plan outlined for you in order to be reconsidered for transplant. Any further alcohol use while INACTIVE will result in your being removed from our waiting list altogether. The transplant team will review your case again, and most likely you will not be able to receive a liver transplant at our transplant program.
What about after I have the transplant?

Alcoholism is a disease. Liver transplant will cure your cirrhosis and liver disease, but it will not cure your addiction. We advise you to go on with treatment or counseling, join support groups, and ask for help from friends and family to assist you with being able to avoid alcohol for the rest of your life.

Alcohol after the transplant will destroy your new liver. If you destroy your new liver from drinking again, you will not be able to have another transplant at UW Health.

Where can I get support?

The transplant team can help with getting you the help you need to treat your alcohol and drug problem. We have an alcohol and drug counselor and social worker on staff. You can reach them by calling the Center for Addictive Disorders at (608) 263-7919 or talk with a member of your transplant team to get in touch with the right person.

Other resources:

http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-health (General information about Alcohol)

http://wisconsin.drugrehab101.com/ (treatment/counseling resources in WI)

http://lakeviewhealth.com/alcohol-detoxification-programs.php (General information)

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is a support group for people who have alcohol abuse problems. You can call in Madison at 608-222-8989 or look on the internet at www.aa.org.