

Frequently Asked Questions



LIVER WELLNESS

For more information on all liver questions, visit the American Liver Foundation website (www.liverfoundation.org), contact the American Liver Foundation toll-free HelpLine (1-800-GO-LIVER), and/or refer to the additional resources section.

The Liver And How It Works

Q Why is the liver important?

A The liver is the largest organ in the body and it plays an important role, performing many difficult functions that are essential for life. Your liver serves as your body's internal chemical power plant. It is impossible to live without the liver and the health of the liver is a major factor in the quality of one's life. Some important functions of the liver are:

- ❑ To convert the food we eat into stored energy, and chemicals necessary for life and growth;
- ❑ To act as a filter to remove alcohol and toxic substances from the blood and convert them to substances that can be excreted from the body;
- ❑ To process drugs and medications absorbed from the digestive system, enabling the body to use them effectively and ultimately dispose of them;
- ❑ To create and export important chemicals used by the body.

Diet And Nutrition

Q Why is the liver so important in nutrition?

A Nutrition and the liver are connected in many ways. Since most of what we eat, breathe, and absorb through our skin must be refined and detoxified by the liver, special attention to nutrition and diet can help keep the liver healthy. Approximately 85–90 percent of the blood that leaves the stomach and intestines carries important nutrients to the liver where they are converted into substances the body can use.

Q Can poor nutrition cause liver disease?

A Poor nutrition is not generally a cause, with the exception of alcoholic liver disease, and liver disease found among starving populations. It is much more likely that poor nutrition is the result of chronic liver disease, and not the cause.

Good nutrition with a balanced diet can actually help the damaged liver regenerate new liver cells. In fact, in some liver diseases, nutrition becomes an essential form of treatment. Ask your doctor.

Q Are “high protein diets” bad for my liver?

A High protein diets are generally well-tolerated by healthy adults. But a dramatic increase in protein-rich foods may be dangerous for people with severe liver or kidney disease for the following two reasons:

- ❑ Such individuals may lack the ability to get rid of the waste products left from protein metabolism.
- ❑ These diets may also limit intake of other important foods, such as fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.

You may not know if you have liver disease. For this and other reasons, ask your doctor before starting any diet.



Q How does liver disease affect nutrition?

A Many chronic liver diseases are associated with malnutrition. The most common is cirrhosis, which is the scarring of the liver. Cirrhosis can occur by repeated injury to liver cells, which can be caused by excessive alcohol intake, chronic viral hepatitis, exposure to certain drugs or toxic substances, and a variety of other causes.

People with cirrhosis often experience loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, and weight loss, giving them a thin appearance. Diet alone does not contribute to the development of this liver disease generally, although non-alcoholic fatty liver, associated with obesity, can lead to cirrhosis. People who are well-nourished but drink large amounts of alcohol are also at risk for alcoholic disease.

Q What is Fatty Liver Disease and is it caused by eating too much fat?

A Fatty Liver Disease, also known as "fatty infiltration of the liver," is not caused by excessive eating of fats, although obesity is a risk factor for fatty liver. In some patients, the fat is associated with inflammation and scarring and may lead to cirrhosis.

Nutritional causes of fat in the liver include alcohol, starvation, obesity, protein malnutrition, and intestinal bypass operation for obesity. Diabetes is another factor associated with fatty liver.

Chemicals And Drugs

Q Can exposure to chemicals or certain drugs cause permanent damage to my liver?

A Yes, chemicals can cause chronic liver disease and cirrhosis. Usually, chronic liver disease develops only after long-term use of a drug. Excessive exposure to certain drugs and chemicals may cause tumors of the liver as well.

Q Can illegal drugs damage the liver?

A Yes, liver damage is common in people who are regular illegal drug users. Most instances of liver damage in these individuals result from viral hepatitis caused by sharing contaminated needles and using alcohol.

Q Is there a connection between herbs and liver damage?

A There is still no solid evidence yet that herbs are helpful to the liver, but there are clear examples of herbs being damaging to the liver.

You may want to contact your physician before taking any herbs; for example, the USDA advises that Kava (Piper Methysticum), which is promoted to aid mood regulation, can possibly cause severe liver injury.

Alcohol

Q Does alcohol cause liver disease?

A Yes, but it is only one of the many causes, and the risk depends on how much you drink and over how long a period. Some causes include viruses, hereditary defects, and reactions to drugs and chemicals.

Q How much alcohol can I safely drink?

A Some people are more sensitive to alcohol than others. Generally, doctors recommend that if you drink, don't drink more than two drinks per day.



Q Are there dangers from alcohol besides the amount that is consumed?

A Yes. Even moderate amounts of alcohol can have toxic effects when taken with over-the-counter drugs containing acetaminophen. If you are taking over-the-counter drugs, be especially careful about drinking and don't use an alcoholic beverage to take your medication. Ask your doctor about precautions for prescription drugs.

Q What kinds of liver diseases are caused by too much alcohol?

A Alcoholic hepatitis is an inflammation of the liver that lasts one to two weeks. Symptoms include loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain and tenderness, fever, jaundice, and sometimes, mental confusion. It is believed to lead to alcoholic cirrhosis over a period of years. Cirrhosis involves permanent damage to the liver cells. "Fatty Liver" is the earliest stage of alcoholic liver disease. If the patient stops drinking at this point, the liver can heal itself.

Q Can "social drinkers" get alcoholic hepatitis?

A Yes. Alcoholic hepatitis is mostly found in alcoholics, but it also occurs in people who are not alcoholics.

Q Do all alcoholics get alcoholic hepatitis and eventually cirrhosis?

A No. Some alcoholics may suffer seriously from the many physical and psychological symptoms of alcoholism, but escape serious liver damage. Alcoholic cirrhosis is found among alcoholics about 10–25 percent of the time. If alcoholic hepatitis is detected and treated early, cirrhosis can be prevented. However, if untreated for a long period of time, it may be fatal, especially if the patient has had previous liver damage.

Q What is cirrhosis?

A Cirrhosis is the scarring of the liver caused by long-term alcohol abuse or chronic viral hepatitis. In children, the most frequent causes are biliary atresia, which often requires a liver transplant.

Hepatitis

Q I think I've heard of other forms of hepatitis aside from A, B, and C. Are there other kinds of hepatitis?

A There are various other viruses known to cause liver disease: hepatitis A, B, C, D, and E, which vary in their severity and characteristics. Hepatitis C can lead to serious, permanent liver damage and, in many cases, death.

Hepatitis A: Is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis A virus (HAV). Hepatitis A can affect anyone. In the United States, hepatitis A can occur in situations ranging from isolated cases of disease to widespread epidemics due to contaminated food or water.

Hepatitis B: Is a serious disease caused by a virus that attacks the liver. The virus, which is called the hepatitis B virus (HBV), can cause lifelong infection, cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver, liver cancer, liver failure, and death. HBV is transmitted by body fluids and blood.

Hepatitis C: Is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV), which is found in the blood of persons who have the disease. HCV is spread by contact with the blood of an infected person.

Hepatitis D: Is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis D virus (HDV), a defective virus that needs the hepatitis B virus to exist. (HDV) is found in the blood of persons infected with the virus.

Hepatitis E: Is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis E virus (HEV) transmitted in much the same way as the hepatitis A virus. Hepatitis E, however, does not occur often in the United States.

For more information contact
American Liver Foundation at 1-800-GO-LIVER
www.liverfoundation.org





Liver Diseases

Q I've heard of _____ liver disease. What is it and how can I learn more about it?

A There are many liver diseases. Below is a list of websites related to different liver diseases, where you can learn details about transmission, testing, treatments, and more:

Lagille Syndrome Alliance

<http://www.alagille.org>

Alpha 1 Association

<http://www.alpha1.org>

Alpha 1 Foundation

<http://www.alphaone.org>

AlphaNet

<http://www.alphanet.org>

American Hemochromatosis Society

<http://www.americanhs.org>

Canadian Hemochromatosis Society

<http://home.istar.ca/~chcts>

Chronic Autoimmune Liver Disease Support Group

<http://hometown.aol.com/pbcers/liverdis.htm>

Gilbert's Web

<http://www.gilbertsweb.co.uk>

Hemochromatosis Foundation

<http://www.hemochromatosis.org>

Iron Disorders Institute

<http://www.irondisorders.org>

Iron Overload Diseases Association

<http://www.ironoverload.org>

Liver Cancer Care

<http://www.hopeforlivercancer.com>

Liver Cancer Network

<http://www.livercancer.com>

Liver Disease Research Branch, NIDDK

<http://www.niddk.nih.gov/fund/divisions/ddn/ldrb.htm>

LiverDisease.com - Homepage of Dr. Melissa Palmer

<http://www.liverdisease.com>

LiverTumor.Org

<http://www.livertumor.org>

Mayo Clinic Rochester - Primary Sclerosing Cholangitis

<http://www.mayo.edu/int-med/gi/mc2483/mc2483.htm>

National Institutes of Health - CancerNet

http://www.cancer.gov/cancer_information/cancer_type/liver

Sarcoidosis Awareness Network

<http://www.sarcoidosisawareness.org>

UPMC Center for Hemochromatosis and Iron Overload Disorders

<http://www.upmc.edu/hemochromatosis>

Wilson's Disease Association

<http://www.wilsonsdisease.org>

As with all American Liver Foundation materials, the information contained in these FAQ sheets is provided for information only. This information does not constitute medical advice and it should not be relied upon as such. The American Liver Foundation does not engage in the practice of medicine. The American Liver Foundation, under no circumstances, recommends particular treatments for specific individuals and, in all cases, recommends that you consult your physician before pursuing any course of treatment.