
Nutrition Fact Sheet



Liver Disease

The liver, the largest organ in the body, performs hundreds of important functions that are essential for life. The liver is the only organ that can regenerate itself. Some of its important functions include:

- Filtering harmful substances from the blood (drugs, alcohol, medications and chemicals) and excreting them from the body.
- Processing nutrients from the food we eat.
- Storing vitamins and minerals.
- Making and storing cholesterol, triglycerides and glucose.
- Creating and exporting important chemicals used by the body.
- Removing poisons from the air, exhaust, smoke, and chemicals we breathe.
- Making clotting factors to help blood clot.
- Making bile to help digest food.
- Processing the medications we take.

A person is at risk for liver damage or disease if they are exposed to blood or bodily fluids at work, regularly exposed to toxins, inject drugs or have gotten a tattoo or piercing with unsterile needles, have frequent unprotected sex, consume alcohol, or have had an abnormal liver function test. Signs or symptoms of liver trouble include:

- Yellow discoloration of the skins or eyes
- Abdominal swelling or severe abdominal pain
- Prolonged itching of the skin
- Very dark urine or pale stools, or the passage of bloody or tar-like stools
- Chronic fatigue, nausea or loss of appetite
- Sleep disturbance or mental confusion

Over 25 million Americans have liver related diseases. Many forms of liver disease are preventable, and many more, if detected early, can be treated effectively. There are more than 100 types of liver disease, which are caused primarily by heredity, reactions to drugs or chemicals, and viruses. The most common types are Hepatitis A, B and C. Hepatitis is a virus that causes inflammation to the liver. There are vaccines that can protect you against hepatitis A and B, but not hepatitis C. Chronic hepatitis C and alcoholic liver disease are the leading causes of cirrhosis in the U.S. Liver disease and cirrhosis are the 7th leading cause of death among adults between the ages of 25 and 64 in the U.S.

>Definitions of some common liver diseases:

Alcoholic liver disease (ALD) is the result of excessive alcohol ingestion characterized by fatty liver, hepatitis, or cirrhosis.

Cirrhosis is the scarring of the liver caused by long-term alcohol abuse or chronic viral hepatitis.

For more information:

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Hepatitis A is caused by the hepatitis A virus (HAV). It is transmitted through food or water that has been contaminated by fecal matter. People usually recover within 3-6 weeks.

Hepatitis B is caused by the hepatitis B virus (HBV). It is a serious liver disease that can cause lifelong infection, cirrhosis, liver cancer, liver failure, and death. It is transmitted by body fluids (semen, vaginal fluid, and saliva) and blood.

Hepatitis C is caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV) and is spread by contact with the blood of an infected person.

Nutrition and Liver Disease

Many chronic liver diseases are associated with malnutrition because they can cause loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, and weight loss. If you have liver disease, supporting your liver is extremely important in maintaining quality of life and delaying disease progression. Since everything we eat must pass through the liver, special attention to nutrition and diet can keep your liver healthy. Early dietary changes can reduce the work the liver has to do and may help a damaged liver regenerate new cells. Consult your doctor for health information and registered dietitian for assistance with your diet.

In order to break down bad substances, the liver has two detoxification pathways. The first pathway in the detoxification process is called Phase One. In this pathway, a harmful chemical is changed to a less harmful one through a series of chemical reactions. Throughout the process, free radicals are made. If there are too many free radicals, damage may occur to the liver cells. How well your body gets rid of free radicals depends to a large degree on the kind of food you give your body. In order to get rid of or reduce the free radicals, our bodies need foods with a lot of antioxidants and chemicals. The antioxidants beta carotene, vitamins C and E, and selenium and many different phytochemicals are found in fruit, vegetables, and whole grains.

>Foods that help Phase One Detoxification

- Beets
- Broccoli
- Brown Rice
- Carrots
- Eggs
- Garlic
- Spinach
- Tomatoes
- Wheat Germ
- Melons and Peppers
- Tomatillos, Papaya, Plantains, and Guava



After the toxic chemical has gone through and been changed by the Phase One pathway, it moves on to the second pathway called Phase Two. In this pathway, the liver cells add a substance to the toxin to make it water-soluble. Water-soluble substances (easily dissolved in water) can be removed from the body through urine and feces. In Phase Two, foods rich in sulfur compounds are needed.

>Foods to help Phase Two Detoxification:

- Broccoli
- Cabbage
- Eggs
- Brazil Nuts
- Garlic
- Onions
- Asparagus
- Watermelon
- Papaya
- Avocado
- Mushrooms



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Healthy Liver Tips

- Eat a well balanced, nutritionally adequate diet.
- Minimize your consumption of smoked, cured and salted foods.
- Avoid flavoring your salt. Try lemon juice, onion, vinegar, garlic, pepper, mustard, cloves, sage or thyme instead.
- Avoid unnecessary medications – including prescription medicines or “natural” herbs.
- Don’t take too many pain relievers, flu products, or cold remedies.
- Never mix alcohol with other drugs and medications.
- Read labels to know the risk certain drugs pose to your liver.
- Avoid alcohol and excessive drug use.
- Don’t take megavitamins, nutritional products, or herbal remedies without consulting your doctor.
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Walk after meals – it helps to improve the circulation of the blood through the liver.
- Don’t mix medicines without the advice of your doctor.
- Never touch a discarded syringe or needle.
- Don’t inject drugs or share needles.
- Don’t share razors, toothbrushes, or nail clippers.
- Be careful if you are getting tattoos or piercings – make sure needles and inks are sterile.
- Practice safe sex.

>Foods for the general health of the liver:

- Fresh fruits and lightly cooked vegetables, especially dark leafy green vegetables and orange, yellow, purple, and red colored fruits
- Bitter foods – mustard greens, romaine lettuce, bitter melon, lemon, broccoli raabe
- Herbs – dill, garlic, onions, caraway seeds, wheat germ, cayenne pepper
- Green Tea has immune-boosting properties and contains less caffeine than coffee
- Drink lots of water to help the kidneys flush out the toxins that the liver has broken down
- Omega-3 fatty acids – salmon, tuna, mackerel, sardines, halibut, flaxseeds, flaxseed oils, walnuts, soybeans, soynuts, avocados

>Foods that make the liver work harder:

- Saturated Fats: sausage, bacon, salami, hot dogs, and high fat dairy products like whole milk, ice cream and cheese
- Fried foods and foods made with saturated fats such as french fries and chips
- Processed foods, like white breads, white rice, cakes, cookies, candy
- Caffeine can make it more difficult to cleanse the liver.
- Eat a light evening meal in order to reduce the kidneys to eliminate the toxins that the liver has broken down.

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