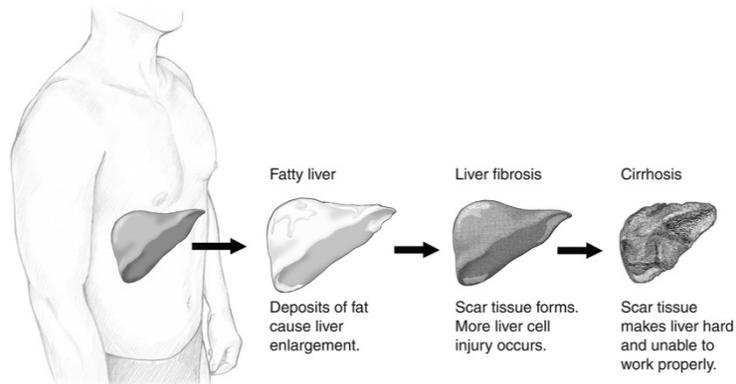# Liver Disease

Overview

The liver is the largest organ in the body and performs several functions that are vital to maintain life. It is essential for digesting food, processing and distributing nutrients throughout the body, and ridding the body of toxic substances. When liver disease develops, the liver's ability to perform its metabolic, detoxification and storage functions is impaired and can result in liver failure. More than 100 types of liver disease have been identified, however, the most two most common ones are hepatitis and alcoholic liver disease (ALD). Overtime, damage to the liver results in scarring, also known as cirrhosis. Cirrhosis occurs when the liver has been irreversibly damaged and can result in liver failure, a severe and life-threatening condition that requires a liver transplant for survival.

Hepatitis

Hepatitis describes inflammation of the liver that is caused by a virus, bacteria, toxin, obstruction, parasite, or chemical. The most common cause of hepatitis is viral hepatitis A, B, C, D, or E. Hepatitis A and E typically spread through contact with food or water that has been contaminated by an infected person's stool. Hepatitis B, C, and D are spread through contact with an infected person's blood or body fluids. Hepatitis is treated with corticosteroid medication and a well balanced diet to help support the recovery process.

Alcoholic liver disease (ALD)

ALD is caused by excessive and chronic alcohol consumption. ALD is a progressive liver disease that is measured by 3 stages: 1) Fatty Liver, 2) Alcoholic hepatitis, and 3) Cirrhosis. While fatty liver and alcoholic hepatitis can be reversed with alcohol abstinence, cirrhosis is characterized by irreversible liver damage. Alcohol liver disease is the 4th leading cause of death in middle aged Americans and can result in serious complications such as portal hypertension, gastrointestinal bleeding, ascites, hepatic encephalopathy, and malnutrition.

Fatty liver	Liver fibrosis	Cirrhosis
Deposits of fat cause liver enlargement.	Scar tissue forms. More liver cell injury occurs.	Scar tissue makes liver hard and unable to work properly.

Causes

- Hepatitis virus
- Primary biliary cirrhosis
- Fat accumulation in the liver
- Genetics
- Cancer
- Chronic alcohol abuse

Liver Disease

Symptoms

- Jaundice (yellow skin and eyes)
- Abdominal pain and swelling
- Chronic fatigue
- Nausea or vomiting
- Loss of appetite
- Swelling in the legs and ankles
- Itchy skin
- Dark colored urine
- Pale or tar colored stool
- Tendency to bruise easily

Nutrition and Liver Disease

Nutrition therapy in liver disease is centered around preventing disease progression and managing complications associated with cirrhosis. Since everything we eat must pass through the liver, special attention to nutrition and diet can support healthy liver functions. Early dietary changes can reduce the stress placed on the liver and can help speed up the recovery process.

Nutrition and Lifestyle Guidelines for Liver Disease

- Abstain from alcohol.
- Achieve and maintain a healthy weight.
- Frequent, small meals may be better tolerated.
- Eat a diet that is high in fresh, whole fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and legumes.
- Consume foods that are high in fiber. Aim to consume 25 to 30 grams of fiber per day.
- Limit salt consumption as it may contribute to fluid retention.
- Avoid eating high fat, fried foods that contain saturated or trans fats. Instead choose healthier fat options such as: Vegetable oils, fatty fish, flaxseeds, avocados, and nuts.
- Avoid processed foods as they put increased strain on the liver.
- Limit foods with added sugar as they may contribute to fat buildup in the liver.
- Aim to drink eight 8-ounce glasses of water per day to help flush out toxins.
- Read drug labels to know the risk certain drugs pose to your liver.
- Don't take megavitamins, nutritional products, or herbal remedies without consulting your healthcare provider or registered dietitian.
- With chronic abuse of alcohol, you may require thiamine and folate supplementation. Speak to your registered dietitian to see if this is appropriate for you.
- Walk after meals to improve the circulation of the blood through the liver.

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