

LOOK  
AFTER  
YOUR  
LIVER



# Look After Your Liver

*Liver*  
NORTH  
LIVER PATIENT SUPPORT

## **Where is my liver?**

Your liver is in your abdomen, at the top, on the right-hand side under the diaphragm and is mostly hidden under your ribs. It weighs about 1.2 - 1.5kg and is brown in colour.

## **What does the liver do?**

It is easiest to think of the liver as the factory of the body. It is always working, performing its many functions that are essential for us to live. Broadly speaking these functions are

- Manufacture of proteins - not only are these the building blocks of the body, many have special functions such as helping the blood to clot, transporting products around the body and helping with the many chemical reactions that are happening all the time.
- Nutrition - the liver helps with the absorption of some food, its breakdown, utilisation and storage.
- Infection barrier - organisms coming into your body from your bowel are destroyed by the liver
- Acid balance - the liver helps maintain the right amount of acid in the body. Too much or too little is very harmful to all cells of the body
- Vitamins and minerals - the liver stores various essential substances such as copper, iron and vitamin B12
- Breakdown of old red blood cells - these are then excreted in bile (the green substance)
- Detoxifying - the breakdown of toxic substances and most medicinal products in a process called drug metabolism.

## **What happens when my liver gets damaged?**

The liver starts to fail in performing its many functions. The loss of these functions has major implications for you and can be a serious threat to your life. Severe damage results in general fatigue, muscle weight loss, a swollen abdomen (ascites), potentially catastrophic bleeding from your stomach or bowel, an increased chance of infection, confusion (encephalopathy) and unfortunately, after a period of time, often death. In contrast mild liver damage (before its potential progression onto severe damage) causes relatively few symptoms. It is therefore important

to know if you are putting yourself at risk of liver damage as then you may then be able to stop this process and let the liver recover or even prevent the damage happening in the first place.

## **What causes liver damage?**

### **- you may be surprised**

Drugs prescribed by your doctor

Most medicines from your doctor are broken down in the liver. A very small number of these can cause minor liver damage. If you are taking one of these medications then your doctor will be monitoring your liver by taking regular blood tests. Serious damage is very, very rare.

### **Paracetamol**

Many of us take Paracetamol for aches and pains from time to time. Some of us know that if taken in overdose (either intentionally or accidentally) it can damage the liver and cause death within days. Not many of us know however that this can occur with a relatively small dose. This for some people can be as little as 12 tablets (12 x 500mg) taken within 24 hours especially when taken with alcohol. Therefore always stay to the guidelines and have no more than 8 x 500mg tablets within 24 hours.

### **Herbal remedies**

Although Chinese herbal treatments have been helpful to some people there are cases where the preparations have been proven to have been contaminated with toxic agents. People should be very careful about the credentials of any such outlets.

Here at the Freeman hospital we have seen several deaths from liver failure that were probably due to such remedies.

### **Alcohol**

Alcohol is a drug. Taking alcohol with the limits (14 units per week, no more than 3 per day) will not cause liver damage. If you regularly take more than the 14 limits or binge drink (taking more than 4 units per day) then it is likely you are damaging your liver. In the UK in 2017 almost 8000 people a year died of liver disease caused by alcohol.

### **Over-eating**

Fat is broken down and some of it stored in the liver. If

you over-eat then you will increase the amount of fat in your body. Some of this is deposited in the liver interfering with its function, causing damage. This type of liver damage is the leading cause of liver failure in the USA. Simply avoiding becoming severely over-weight will mean that this will not happen to you.

### **Unprotected sexual intercourse**

If a condom is not used, viruses (and other sexually transmitted diseases) can be passed from one person to the next. You will not be able to tell who is infected. Examples of transmitted viruses are Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C, and HIV. If you contract one of these viruses, they are almost impossible to cure, can affect you for many years and frequently cause you to die early, often from liver failure.

### **Chemicals and solvents**

Doing things such as sniffing glue, lighter fuel, aerosols, paint thinner, poppers or video head cleaner (amyl nitrate) is incredibly dangerous. The toxic substances that they contain damage many parts of your body including your brain, liver, kidneys and heart. Every year about 100 children aged 12-18 die from solvent abuse. In one third of these deaths occur in first-time users. Therefore the message is clear - do not do it - ever.

### **Illicit drugs**

If you take illicit drugs you are causing damage to your body including your liver. These drugs include cannabis, LSD and magic mushrooms, amphetamine sulphate (speed), MDMA (ecstasy), cocaine and heroin. In 2017 there were over 3500 deaths directly caused by these substances.

## **Can we treat a damaged liver?...**

### **Prevention is better than cure**

Treating someone with liver failure is difficult. Stopping the offending substance helps and we can deal with some of the complications that occur with liver failure. This often may be not enough and the only option to prevent death is to consider the patient for a liver transplant. Even though this procedure is widely practiced, it is not successful for every patient. Many patients are too sick even to have a transplant. Even if you are placed on a

waiting list there is only an 80% chance a liver will become available before you become too unwell. If you do undergo a liver transplant you have an 85% 1 year survival rate and about a 55-60% 5 year survival rate.

Therefore it is clear that prevention of liver damage is better than cure.

### Summary Checklist

- Medications from your doctor are safe.
- Take no more than the recommended dose of Paracetamol (8 x 500mg tablets per 24 hours)
- Make sure you get herbal remedies from a reputable outlet
- Do not take more than the recommended intake of alcohol: (14 units per week, no more than 2 per day)
- Watch your weight
- Do not have unprotected sexual intercourse
- Do not inhale solvents or take illicit drugs

### **Acknowledgement:**

Some of the information contained in this leaflet may also appear elsewhere. We are very grateful to Mr Jeremy French FRCS, Consultant Transplant Surgeon at the Freeman Hospital, Newcastle upon Tyne for writing this LIVErNORTH publication for the benefit of liver patients.

### **LIVErNORTH can help you**

As well as having many health professionals as members, we have access to extensive information on most liver diseases and therapies.

We support each other in our free newsletter, at our meetings and via our helpline. To join our mailing list and receive your own free copy of our quarterly newsletter which lists all the meeting times and local helpline numbers, ring us on 0191 3702961. All calls are treated in strictest confidence and membership is absolutely free.

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