

Life-saver liver

➤ Organ's many functions show why it must be protected

THE liver is a hard-working organ that plays an essential role in digestion, detoxification, immunity and metabolism. A healthy, well-functioning liver is the foundation for good health.

Essential functions

➤ Detoxification

Trending detox diets often appear online, claiming various health benefits. However, the liver is the primary organ responsible for dealing with toxins and it does not need any fads to get the job done.

The liver produces its own enzymes to break down metabolic waste and convert substances so that they can be secreted in urine and faeces. Without this function, waste substances such as bilirubin would build up in the body, leading to problems like jaundice. Eventually, this build-up would affect even brain function and leads to a coma.

➤ Digestion

The liver produces bile, a digestive fluid that helps to break down fat so it can be absorbed, and also helps store fat-soluble vitamins A, D, E and K. Without bile, the human body would be unable to absorb these vitamins, which could lead to deficiencies that affect different aspects of health, such as impaired vision from low levels of vitamin A, weakened bones from insufficient

vitamin D, muscle weakness from lack of vitamin E and poor blood clotting without vitamin K.

➤ Immunity

Among its many other functions, the liver produces Kupffer cells, which are concentrated in the liver. These cells help to filter and remove harmful pathogens like viruses and bacteria, which can enter the liver from the gastrointestinal tract. By helping to prevent inflammation and infection, Kupffer cells play a vital role in protecting liver health, allowing it to perform its various functions in the body.

➤ Metabolism

The body's ability to store energy and manage blood sugar levels is also regulated by the liver, which stores glycogen (a form of glucose) so that it can be released for energy when needed. Another important metabolic function is the development of proteins that help with blood-clotting, and albumin, which is essential for maintaining blood volume. In terms of these metabolic functions, the implications of poor liver health would include low energy, dysregulation of blood sugar levels, easy bruising and swelling in the abdomen and legs.

Everlasting organ? Not really

Much has been said about the liver being the only organ that is capable of self-regeneration, and while that is good news, there are limits to what it can handle.

Unhealthy lifestyle habits are the leading cause of poor liver health and liver disease, and the main culprits are excessive alcohol intake, diets that are very high in saturated fat, sugar and processed



Few people recognise the critical importance of the liver, but this humble organ does more than most people realise.

food, obesity, which is related to diet and lack of exercise, and the impact of certain medications, supplements and traditional or herbal remedies.

Stages of liver disease

While early symptoms of liver disease are non-specific, more obvious signs appear as its condition deteriorates.

Fatty liver is the initial stage of liver disease and it is not associated with any symptoms – only a scan will reveal the fat deposits that have built up in the liver. This progresses to inflammation and subsequently scarring – by this time, you may have symptoms such as fatigue and abdominal pain that comes and goes. Without intervention, scar tissue will build up from the liver's ongoing attempts to heal itself, advancing to fibrosis. At this stage, liver functions are impacted, leading to more severe symptoms, such as abdominal pain from an enlarged liver or fluid build-up in the abdomen.

The next stage of liver disease is known as cirrhosis, in which the damage to the liver and its blood vessels becomes irreversible.

When the liver becomes cirrhotic, you are likely to have symptoms such as jaundice and

find yourself more prone to bruising or bleeding. As liver functions continue to worsen, you may even vomit blood and experience confusion or weakness. Moving forward, the damaged cells can become cancerous, leading to liver cancer or progressing to liver failure.

Healthy liver, healthy life

As liver damage has its roots in unhealthy lifestyle habits, the key to turning things around is to adopt healthier habits.

➤ Watch what you eat

Eat more good fats from sources such as olive oil, avocado, fatty fish, seeds and nuts. Consume salt and sugar in moderation. Cut back on processed foods, saturated fats and substances such as alcohol.

➤ Stay active and maintain a healthy weight

This is good for overall health. Among those who are overweight, a 5–10% reduction in weight can reverse fatty liver.

➤ Get adequate sleep

The liver works hardest while we are at rest.

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