

Liver Disease

The liver is the largest gland and solid organ in the body and lies just below the ribs on the right side of your body. The liver weighs approximately 1,8 kgs in men and 1,3kgs in women. This organ is vital for life and has over 500 different functions. The liver is a dark red brown colour and holds approximately 0,57 litres blood. It is divided into two main lobes; the right lobe is the bigger lobe. Each lobe is further divided into 100,000 lobules. Liver cells are called hepatocytes and have an average lifespan of 150 days; these make up two thirds of the liver. The rest of the liver is the biliary tract, which leads to the gall bladder.

Some of the most important functions of the liver are:

- Manufactures bile;
- Controls levels of fat, proteins and glucose in the blood;
- Fights infections;
- Stores iron, vitamins and other essential chemicals;
- Breaks down food and turns it into energy;
- Manufactures, breaks down and regulates several hormones;
- Produces enzymes and proteins which are responsible for important chemical reactions in the body, e.g. blood clotting and tissue repair;
- Neutralizes and destroys drugs and toxins;
- Produces quick energy in emergencies.

With so many vital functions, it is easy for something to go wrong. The liver is not an ageing organ, in the absence of liver disease, the liver will function fully throughout life. There are many liver disorders. These are the most common:

Hepatitis

Hepatitis means there is an infection of the liver. It is usually caused by viral infections, hepatitis A, B, C, D, E and G. The main differences between these are how they are spread and the effects they have on health. Hepatitis B and C can cause long term liver disease and could lead to cirrhosis and liver cancer. However there are also non-viral causes, such as excess alcohol, side effects of some drugs and autoimmune hepatitis.

Cirrhosis

Cirrhosis is a result of long term continuous liver damage. Usually, if the liver is damaged for a short time, the liver recovers. However, when the inflammation is severe and continues, scar tissue – fibrosis – develops. Usually the liver tissue is smooth, but in this case the smooth tissue is replaced by irregular nodules and the liver becomes harder. The formation of fibrosis and irregular nodules are known as cirrhosis. Cirrhosis is irreversible. Hepatitis B and C, inherited liver disorders, bile duct diseases and alcohol misuse can cause cirrhosis.

Gallstones and gallbladder disease

Approximately 10 percent of the population develops either gallstones or other gallbladder disease at some time in their lives.

Alcoholic liver disease

It is not clear why some heavy drinkers develop liver damage and others do not. Consistent heavy drinking can lead to fatty liver, or alcoholic hepatitis and most seriously – liver cirrhosis.

Fatty liver

Although a fatty liver is not a liver disease, it could lead to liver damage. As the word describes – there is too much fat in the liver. Fatty liver can be caused by many different factors, of which alcohol is the most common cause. Nutritional causes of fatty liver are – starvation, obesity and protein malnutrition. The fat simply enters the liver from the intestines and from the tissues. Normally the fat from the diet is metabolised by the liver,.

If the amount exceeds what the body requires, the fat will be stored – in this case in the liver. This happens over a period of time and the liver becomes enlarged. If the cause of fatty liver is dietary, a low fat diet is the best treatment.