



HEPATITIS C LESSONS • PART 5

Understanding and Caring for Your Liver

PURPOSE

By knowing how the liver works, people in your group can learn how to take better care of themselves as they live with the virus.

FACTS ABOUT LIVER FUNCTION

Discuss within the group the importance of the liver and what it does. You can talk about how it helps your body stay healthy in many ways, including:

- *Cleaning bacteria from your blood*
- *Controls male and female hormones*
- *Stores vitamins (A, D, E, & K) and some minerals (copper and iron)*
- *Stores nutrients and releases them when the body needs them*
- *Filters everything that enters the body:*
 - *breathed in the air*
 - *absorbed through the skin*
 - *taken by mouth*
- *Makes chemicals that help blood to clot*

DISCUSSION TOPICS

What is the liver?

What does the liver do?

What are liver enzymes?

Where can liver damage come from?

How do you stay healthy and protect your liver?

Handout: How do you stay healthy and protect your liver?

Here are some sample questions and answers you can use as you like during your meeting

What is the liver?

The liver is one of the largest organs in the body. It is also one of the most important. You simply cannot live without your liver.

It has 2 main sections called lobes. It is located on the right side of your abdomen (belly), behind your lower ribs, which help protect it.

What does it do?

We can survive only a short while if the liver stops working. If it fails, your body will fail, too. Here are some of the important things your liver does for you:

- *It helps clean your blood. It gets rid of waste products, drugs (prescription, over-the-counter, and street or illegal drugs), alcohol, and other toxins (poisons)*
- *It helps control your body's hormones*
- *It helps control most chemical levels in your blood*
- *It produces bile, a yellow-green fluid that helps digest food. Bile also helps*
- *carry away waste when you urinate and move your bowels*
- *It makes the proteins that help stop bleeding, so injuries can heal*
- *It helps remove bacteria from your bloodstream to fight infections*
- *It stores vitamins, sugar, hormones, and important minerals like iron. As your body needs them, your liver lets them go safely into your bloodstream*

NOTES

What are Liver Enzymes?

Liver enzymes are proteins, called AST and ALT, that the liver makes. They help the liver do some of its important tasks. We all have some of these enzymes in our blood. But if the liver is damaged or sick, you can have too many liver enzymes in your blood.

Blood tests can measure these liver enzymes. When your healthcare provider looks at the results, AST and ALT numbers may be higher than normal if the

liver is damaged (keep in mind that the liver can be damaged and the AST and ALT numbers may be normal). Numbers for both tend to change, so you may have to have a lot of blood tests. This lets the healthcare provider know what is going on in your body.

Because each person is different, your healthcare provider will tell you what the normal levels are for you.

NOTES

What can hurt the liver?

The liver can become damaged in many ways:

- *Viruses, such as hepatitis*
- *Alcohol—especially if you drink a lot of it*
- *Prescription drugs, street or illegal drugs, or over-the-counter drugs, such as acetaminophen (Tylenol® (acetaminophen), McNEILL-PPC, Inc)* and certain herbal supplements, especially if you take too much. Large doses sometimes cause liver failure*
- *Injuries to your liver*
- *Tobacco*

Always check with the healthcare provider before taking any drugs—prescription or over-the-counter—as well as any supplements, including homeopathic drugs, that you may be taking.

The most common type of liver disease in the United States is fatty liver. It happens when there is too much fat in the liver cells. People have more of a chance of getting fatty liver if they drink alcohol, have diabetes, or are overweight.

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How can you protect your liver even if you have hepatitis C?

Remember that the liver processes everything we eat and drink. Also, any chemicals we are exposed to can have an effect on the liver.

- *Eat healthy foods, including vegetables, fruits, and lean meat*
- *Drink plenty of clear fluids, such as water, to help remove toxins (poisons) and help process nutrients*
- *Avoid hard liquor, wine, and beer because alcohol can hurt your liver*
- *Ask your healthcare provider if you should avoid caffeine*
- *Stay away from undercooked shellfish. It can carry hepatitis A and other illnesses, which can be very dangerous to people with hepatitis C*
- *Avoid too much sugar, salt, fatty foods, and fried foods*
- *Get vaccinated for hepatitis A and B (if you are not already protected)*
- *Exercise regularly. Talk to your healthcare provider before starting a new exercise program*
- *Get plenty of rest*
- *Try to reduce stress*

Protect your liver from drugs and medicines.

- *Do not use tobacco or recreational drugs*
- *Drugs like acetaminophen (Tylenol®) can be harmful if you take too much*
- *Be very careful when mixing alcohol with drugs. Never mix acetaminophen and alcohol*
- *Always check with your healthcare provider before taking any drugs—prescription or over-the-counter—as well as any supplements*

NOTES

Review Points

Q. *Your liver does over 500 things for you. Can you name 3?*

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Q. *Your liver is protected by:*

- Your ribs*
- Not drinking alcohol or smoking*
- Your heart*

Q. *Name 3 foods, beverages, or habits that are good for you and your liver:*

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Q. *Name 3 foods, beverages, or habits that are harmful for your liver:*

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Suggested Reading:

An Introduction to the Liver

www.hcvadvocate.org/hepatitis/factsheets_pdf/The_Liver.pdf