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Issues in Liver Health

Is there such a thing as a liver-healthy diet?

Your liver cares about what you eat and for good reason. This vital organ is a power plant, manufacturing facility and environmental protection agency all rolled into one. But how effectively it can do its many jobs depends upon you.

Think of the foods and beverages that you consume each day as raw materials. The liver then breaks down and processes these foods into the products your body needs to function. Some of the products that this 'factory' manufactures (for example certain proteins) help your body fight infection, allow your blood to clot, and transport oxygen to other organs. The liver also helps manage glucose levels (what you need for energy) and warehouses important vitamins and minerals (like vitamin D and iron) so the body doesn't run out between meals.

If you want your liver to produce quality products and to run an efficient operation, you have to provide it with a steady supply of good quality raw materials. So what do you do if you want to have a 'liver-healthy diet'?

"A liver-healthy diet will include food from all four food groups (grains, dairy, meat & alternatives and fruits and vegetables) with enough variety to ensure all nutrient needs in the body are met," explains Dr. Diana Mager, Chairperson of the CLF's National Education Advisory Committee and a Professor of Clinical Nutrition at the University of Alberta. "What this means is fresh fruits and vegetables, lean cuts of meat, a range of nuts and seeds, whole grains and lower fat dairy products. The more variety, the better."



While healthy food can help your liver maintain top performance, unhealthy food can make it harder for your liver to function properly and can even lead to long-term damage in the form of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease.

"Processed fast foods and sugar-sweetened beverages are the biggest culprits in contributing to fatty liver disease," says Dr. Mager. "Particularly if a person is already overweight or obese, it becomes more and more difficult for the person's liver to handle high levels of these foods. When a person eats too much fat and sugar, the liver may be unable to export the excess to other organs. The excess sugar will get converted to fat in the liver. This fat build-up can lead to fatty liver disease or make an already fatty liver worse."

For someone who may already have liver disease, getting proper nutrition can be a challenge due to lack of appetite, fatigue, difficulties in absorbing specific nutrients or other complications.

"When the liver is already sick, this is when it needs healthy food the most," explains Dr. Mager. "A healthy diet can provide it with much needed nutrients and antioxidants that will promote improved function. The best approach is to focus on nutrient dense foods -- in other words, quality over quantity. Much like we would recommend for an otherwise healthy person, a person with liver disease should try to eat fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains and protein-rich meats, meat alternatives or dairy products. Dietitians can help provide advice on how to get the most nutritional value out of the foods you are able to eat."

If you are looking for resources to help you choose foods that are more liver-healthy, you can download our [Liver Healthy Shopping Guide](#) or check out some of these [recipes](#) from the *Healing Fatty Liver Disease: a Complete Health & Diet Guide*.

Photo: Dr. Mager arranges a colourful and healthy food display while her daughter samples the merchandise.

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