

Quick Tips for Positive Types

JUST WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW



Liver Health



What is it & why does it matter?

Hepatotoxicity is a general term for liver damage. There are several specific conditions that are related to hepatotoxicity, they are hepatitis (which is an inflammation of the liver), hepatic necrosis (a severe form of hepatitis, accompanied by death of liver cells), and hepatic steatosis (a build up of fat inside liver cells).

Liver problems are very common for people living with HIV.

There are a number of reasons for this:

- ◆ Many antiretroviral medications used to fight HIV can cause damage to the liver over the long term.
- ◆ Other drugs, as well as alcohol, can also damage the liver, especially when combined.
- ◆ Many people with HIV are also infected with hepatitis B or C. These viruses attack the liver, increasing the likelihood of liver damage.

QuickTip:

*“hepa” means “liver”
“hepatotoxicity”
is another way of saying
“liver damage”*

Recognizing Symptoms

Although liver damage can occur without any symptoms at all, some of the more frequent ones are:

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| ◆ Nausea and/or vomiting | ◆ Abdominal pain | ◆ Loss of appetite |
| ◆ Diarrhea, pale and/or fatty stools | ◆ Feeling tired or weak | ◆ Jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes) |
| ◆ Liver enlargement | ◆ Dark urine | ◆ Severe itching |

Why does it matter?

The liver is a very important internal organ: it is responsible for many of the body's functions, including storage and release of sugars, vitamins and minerals; immune function; removal of toxins and bacteria from the blood; manufacturing of body proteins, and processing drugs (including many of the drugs used to fight HIV).

Damage to the liver affects its ability to carry out these functions effectively.



Managing liver health

Liver function testing

Sometimes, there are no symptoms of liver damage. But your doctor can monitor for changes in your liver function with simple blood tests. This is particularly important if you also have hepatitis.

Liver function testing is often done before starting any new anti-HIV drugs, and sometimes after you have been taking the drugs for some time. This is because it can take days, weeks, or even months for liver function tests to show changes.

Here is what your doctor is looking for:

Full name	Short name
Alanine transaminase	ALT
Aspartate transaminase	AST
Alkaline phosphatase	AP
Gamma-glutamyl transpeptidase	GGT
Bilirubin	–
Albumin	–

One important note: even if liver function test results are outside of the normal range, it does not always mean there is liver damage. Talk to your doctor if you have any questions about your liver function test results. If your results are outside the expected range, your doctor may ask you to return for more tests (they may become stable, or go back down on their own over time). Or, you may need to make changes in the drugs you are taking.

Alcohol, many drugs, other substances and opportunistic infections, can cause liver damage, or make it worse.

Avoid or limit:

- ◆ **Consumption of alcohol and recreational drugs.**
- ◆ **Toxic substances**, including pesticides, solvents, and paint thinner. Exposure to these substances gives the liver more work to do, adding to its strain.
- ◆ **Herbal and nutritional supplements**, as some can be dangerous for the liver and may interact with anti-HIV drugs.
- ◆ **Drugs with a stronger effect on the liver. Make sure your healthcare team knows about all drugs you are taking, prescribed or not**, to avoid interactions that could harm the liver. This includes vitamins, herbal and nutritional supplements.
- ◆ **Infection with hepatitis A, B or C increases the likelihood of liver damage.** If you already have one or more of these viruses, it's especially important to have your liver function monitored regularly. Therefore, before you stop taking any medications be sure to discuss with your doctor.

If you have not been infected with these viruses, you should avoid them. There are vaccines to prevent infection with hepatitis A or B, but there is no vaccine for hepatitis C. It is important that you **do not** share needles to inject drugs and always use a condom when you have sex.



When should I call my doctor?

It is difficult to know how quickly liver damage will progress, so you should deal with any signs of possible liver damage right away. **Call your doctor if you have any of the possible signs of liver damage listed.**

Your liver has a lot of work to do. Help keep it healthy by avoiding excess alcohol, recreational drugs and infections that can add to its strain.