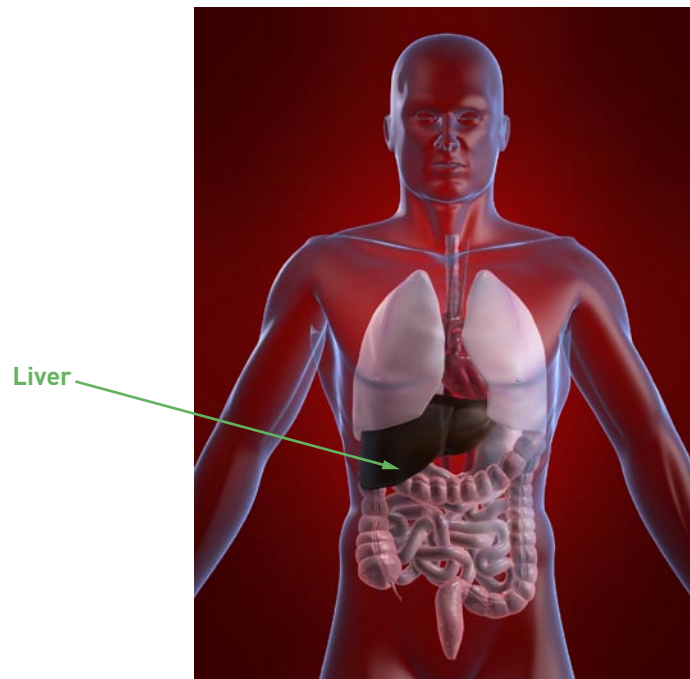


The liver

The liver is the largest internal organ in the body, weighing around 1.2–1.5 kilograms. The liver is located on the right side of your abdomen behind the ribs. The liver is critical to a person's wellbeing because it performs many vital functions including:

- clears the blood of waste products, hormones, drugs and other toxins;
- breaks down hormones and old blood cells;
- makes, stores and releases sugars, fats, and proteins;
- makes clotting factors that help the blood to clot;
- releases bile (a greenish-yellow fluid) to assist with digesting food; and
- storage of vitamins, minerals and iron.

The liver is the only organ in the body that has the ability to regenerate itself and create new liver tissue. Therefore, the liver can still function if a significant part of the organ is diseased or removed.



Hepatitis

Hepatitis is a term that means inflammation of the liver. It may be caused by viruses, alcohol, drugs and other toxins, or less commonly by a breakdown in a person's immune system. Inflammation is a natural reaction of the body to injury and often causes swelling and tenderness.

There are five viruses that specifically cause hepatitis. They have been labelled: hepatitis A, hepatitis B; hepatitis C; hepatitis D; and hepatitis E. Each of these viruses may produce similar symptoms and they can all infect and inflame the liver. The main difference between the hepatitis viruses is how they are transmitted (spread) and the effects they have on a person's health.

There have been reports of two other viruses, called hepatitis F and G. Neither of these are true hepatitis viruses. They are not associated with any liver disease and do not exacerbate liver disease caused by other hepatitis viruses.

Hepatitis is described as either an acute or chronic illness. An acute illness will only last a short time and although it may be severe, most people recover from the illness within a few weeks with no lasting effects. A chronic illness is one that lasts a long time, often for the rest of a person's life.

Effect of hepatitis viruses on the liver

Hepatitis viruses that develop into a chronic infection have the potential to cause liver damage because the virus reproduces in the liver. Over time, more liver cells are damaged and destroyed, and scar tissue takes their place. This process is called fibrosis.

Severe fibrosis can cause the liver to become hardened, and prevents it from working normally. This is called cirrhosis of the liver.

In a small number of cases, serious damage to the liver can lead to liver failure and liver cancer.

For more information

For further information on hepatitis C please contact the national infoline 1300 HEP ABC (1300 437 222). The infoline diverts to information and support lines at your local state or territory hepatitis council.