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ARE YOU A LIVER BIRD?

It may not be a part of your body to which you give much thought, but there are hundreds of good reasons why you need to take care of your liver. Alex Gazzola reports on why liver disease could be an epidemic waiting to happen

It may not be the most beautiful of bodily organs, but the liver appears to be hot news at the moment – and for good

reason. This month sees the release of *The Holford 9-Day Liver Detox* by Patrick Holford and Fiona McDonald Joyce (£10.99, Piatkus), which aims to inform the reader on how to boost your liver's detox mechanisms, in order to feel revitalised, lose weight, boost energy levels and clarify skin. And recently released too is the LiverCheck – the first home blood liver test to be made available in the United Kingdom, designed to help identify liver damage through a tiny pinprick blood sample.

Meanwhile, mid-November saw the launch of the Alcohol Health Alliance, a coalition of medical bodies, health campaigning groups and charities who are aiming to press the Government into doing more to prevent alcohol-related illness. Among AHA's members is the British Liver Trust, who subsequently warned of an alarming growth of liver disease in this country – there has been a 100 per cent rise in the last decade of cases of cirrhosis of the liver.

"Increasing numbers of people are risking their health by drinking to hazardous levels, including drinking at home," comments the BLT's

chief executive, Alison Rogers. "People should be made more aware about the harm that alcohol can cause, so they can make informed choices about their drinking. It is important to remember

that alcoholic liver disease can affect anyone, and is not just an illness associated with alcoholics."

Is alcohol to blame?

Government recommendations remain that women should not drink more than 14 units a week, but this fails to take into account body shape or size, or indeed age and stage of life. Further, regular but modest drinkers process alcohol more efficiently than irregular drinkers, and drinking with meals is very different to drinking on an empty stomach.

Herbalist and nutritionist Alison Cullen of Bioforce (bioforce.co.uk) agrees. "One woman can have no ill effect from two units while another woman can be wiped out for a week," she says. "Often, it depends on your level of toxicity and nutrient levels and how your body handles alcohol. If you find you're losing tolerance to modest quantities of alcohol and the official guidelines seem high for you, then it's a possible indicator that your liver is working inefficiently."

Dr Rajiv Jalan is a liver expert from University College Hospital in London. He believes when it comes to liver health, most of the emphasis has gone on taking care with alcohol intake – but this is only part of the full picture.

"Alcohol accounts for no more than about 30 per cent of reported liver diseases," he says. "The rest is down to other causes, such as viral

infections, and about 30 per cent is due to obesity, which is the fastest growing cause of liver disease in the Western world. We need to change the perception that it's only alcoholic and sexually promiscuous individuals who are at risk, and get all women to start thinking about their livers much more."

There has been a lot of research into how excess levels of dietary fats and sugars impact on the liver, and these may turn out to be major culprits, but definitive conclusions from which nutritional advice can be given are lacking, says Jalan, who emphasises that fatty liver disease can just as readily progress to cirrhosis of the liver as alcoholic liver disease or viral hepatitis infections.

One study, though, by researchers at Boston Children's Hospital in the US, and published in the journal *Obesity* in the summer of 2007, suggested that starchy, high GI foods could be contributing to fatty liver. These foods, which include white bread, white rice, processed starchy cereals and potatoes, as well as refined sugary sweets and treats, all cause greater insulin release in the body, which 'instructs' it to store fat.

However our diets impact on liver health, one thing is certain – the combination of obesity and alcohol has a synergistic effect, adding up to far greater damage and ill health than either issue contributes on its own. It is within overweight women who drink more than the recommended

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amount of alcoholic units weekly where the greatest risks to liver health lie. Jalan believes many everyday symptoms could have liver disease or compromised liver function as an underlying cause: "Lack of sexual function, tiredness, lack of concentration, poor performance – these are everyday symptoms many women report and experience constantly. We don't know how many people are effected, or for how many liver problems are the cause, but in many cases it could be down to poor liver function."

Alison Cullen agrees. "A lot of young women abuse their livers through alcohol and diet, and being tired all the time is associated with poor liver functioning because the liver is key to so many processes in the body," she says. "Hormone imbalances are often based in the liver – for instance, if the liver can't break down oestrogen. It's in charge of storing iron, and also of energy production. Skin problems often have their roots in poor liver detoxification. Fatigue is a big issue with regards to the liver."

Alison advocates the use of some herbs for the liver. Milk thistle is one commonly associated with this organ, and many assume this can help cleanse. Not so. "Actually, milk thistle improves production of an antioxidant called glutathione and boosts the way the liver cells are protected against toxins – whether it's alcohol, drugs or environmental toxins," she says. "It also helps to stimulate the regeneration of liver cells."

However, milk thistle can't help the liver do its job better, or improve the way it metabolises fats: "If you want to cleanse, restore some liver function, and help the processing of fats, then you need dandelion root, which is a brilliant herb for the production and movement of bile, and cynara (artichoke), which helps fat metabolism. These are cleansing and nutrient-providing and can help get the liver back on its feet after the season's excesses," says Alison.

Dr Rajiv Jalan, however, is sceptical about the power of herbs. "If you are doing harm to your liver, nothing will protect it. I've read articles advising women to take milk thistle before a heavy night's drinking, and this is just irresponsible. You've got to avoid doing what you're doing which is known to harm the liver."

Part of the problem as far as women is

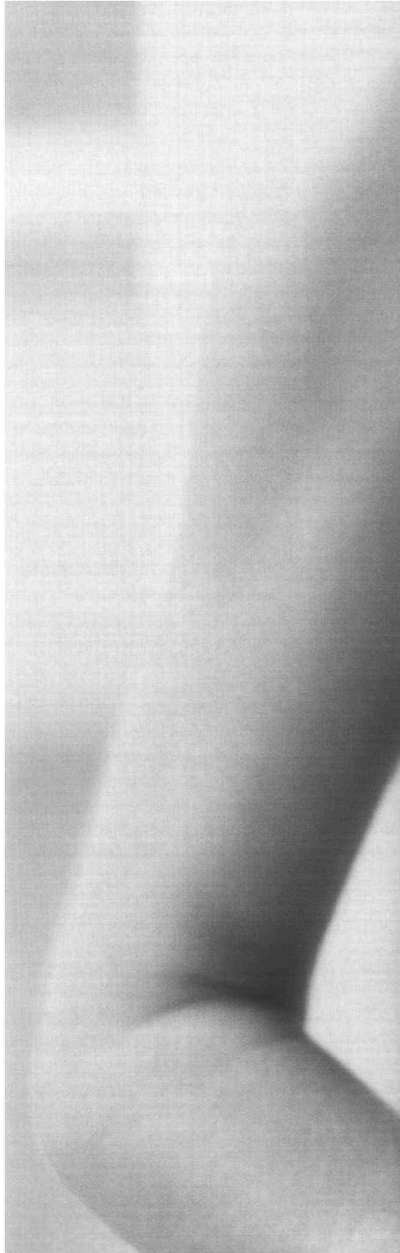
concerned is that the liver cannot be felt – like the heart – and cannot be seen – like the skin or the breasts. Undoubtedly, it lacks a certain 'glamour' appeal. Bluntly, the liver is not sexy, and so doesn't receive much attention, both from the media, or from women themselves. As Alison Cullen puts it: "Some women fret more over a broken nail than the state of their liver."

And yet liver disease is a silent progressive killer, much like cardiovascular disease – it's not something you get in one day. "We are sitting on a liver disease epidemic," warns Jalan, "and all of us need to wake up to the problem."

Further information

- Call 0800 1300 588 for a free brochure on the LiverCheck test. Alternatively email info@liver-check.com with your name and address, or see liver-check.com
- The British Liver Trust's free helpline is on 0800 652 7330; www.britisHLivertrust.org.uk

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Herbal Helpers

- **A.Vogel Milk Thistle Complex** contains five herbs traditionally used for their action on the liver. The major herbs are artichoke, milk thistle and dandelion, with support herbs boldo and peppermint, used by some therapists to enhance liver and gall bladder function and improve digestion. Milk Thistle Complex £8.49 for 50ml, and £9.55 for 60 tincture tablets, from health stores and pharmacies. Stockists 01294 277344; avogel.co.uk
- **HepaGuard Forte** provides nutritional support to the liver, combining nutrients such as taurine, apple extract and antioxidants. Choline, inositol, l-methionine, sodium sulphate and artichoke assist detoxification. £14.65 for 60 veg caps. From health stores, mail order 0121 433 3727 and biocare.co.uk
- **Boots Milk Thistle Tincture** (1:5 extract) is made from milk thistle seeds and costs £5.99 for 50ml. See stores or visit boots.com
- **Higher Nature's Milk Thistle & Artichoke:** Silymarin & Cynarin is a super-potency herbal formula providing standardised extracts of milk thistle and artichoke leaf and schizandra (60 veg caps cost £8.90). See highernature.co.uk; 0800 458 4747

GOOD LIVER FOODS

Following healthy-eating guidelines of a varied, balanced diet, rich in fruit and vegetables, and low in processed foods, saturated fat and sugars, is probably the best thing you can do for the health of your liver. But some naturopaths and nutritionists recommend certain groups or types of food to be particularly beneficial to liver health, and these may be worth incorporating more often into your diet. They are typically pungent or bitter tasting and include:

- **Sulphurous onion-family vegetables** such as garlic, onions, leeks and shallots
- **Brassica and mustard vegetables** such as white cabbage, Savoy, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, turnips, kale, horseradish, rocket and watercress
- **Daisy family leaves and vegetables** (which include the milk thistle) such as artichoke, dandelion, radicchio and chicory
- **Some other vegetables** such as beetroot and assorted legumes, as well as spices such as turmeric and cinnamon

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The liver is an incredible, industrious part of the body, the only internal organ with the ability to regenerate itself, and which has more than 500 functions. Here are some of the most important and intriguing:

Energy storage The liver stores the body's key energy source glucose as glycogen in the liver, which can be rapidly converted back to glucose when there is an urgent need for energy.

Waste removal It's not only the kidneys which filter the blood: the liver can do this job too, passing wastes into the digestive system via the bile ducts for eventual excretion through the colon.

Blood clotting The liver produces clotting factors, including blood clotting factors.

Immune defence The liver contains half of the body's supply of bacteria-busting macrophages, a key part of the body's defence system.

Digestion This is an important digestive function, helping to break down fats for digestion and assimilation.

Mineral storage The liver stores vitamins, iron and many other minerals such as copper.

Warmth Because it works so hard and generates so much energy, the liver effectively 'warms up' the blood passing through it, which distributes this warmth throughout the body.