

Foods that Love the Liver

Our livers have to put up with a lot in this world. Some of the functions of this organ include: 1) metabolizing proteins, carbohydrates and fats from our food 2) producing cholesterol (which is then used in bile acids and fat digestion) and 3) producing proteins necessary for blood clotting and fluid balance in the body. But the toughest job this organ may be responsible for is detoxification: this means alcohol, pesticides, herbicides, air pollutants—anything that is toxic to our cells. Foods for the liver can therefore benefit anyone, although those with liver disease will benefit more profoundly. Since pesticides and herbicides are toxins that increase the liver's workload, eating organic foods will be a significant help. The cost is often somewhat higher but the nutrition count is also higher, as is the benefit to the body. So whether it is a food or herb listed, always think organic first and you'll already be on the way to easing the load on your liver.

VITAMINS

Vitamin C is an antioxidant which means that it scavenges for toxic chemicals that damage our cells. In this capacity it is protective to the liver. Vitamin C is destroyed by exposure to air, so the fresher you can eat these fruits and vegetables, the more concentrated their levels of the vitamin will still be. For example, a cantaloupe that is left uncovered in the fridge will lose 35% of its Vitamin C in less than 24 hours. Foods high in Vitamin C are:

Acerola cherries	Mustard greens	Cantaloupe	Parsley
Rose hips	Cauliflower	Asparagus	Collard greens
Red chili peppers	Red cabbage	Mangoes	Kiwi fruit
Guava	Strawberries	Green sweet peppers	Citrus fruits
Red sweet peppers	Papaya	Broccoli	Brussel sprouts
Kale	Spinach		

Vitamin E is also an antioxidant and protective to the liver. Studies have shown success with using Vitamin E supplementation in treating damaged livers. Sources of Vitamin E in foods include:

Almonds	Asparagus	Walnuts
Filberts	Avocados	Tomatoes
Sunflower seeds	Whole grains	Green leafy vegetables

B vitamins are especially important when there has been liver damage. Some of the B vitamins assist the liver in detoxification and become depleted from excessive alcohol consumption. The chief reason that excessive alcohol causes B vitamin depletion is partly due to impaired digestion and decreased absorption in the intestines. Food sources of B vitamins include:

Nutritional yeast	Peanuts	Buckwheat	Almonds
Wheat germ	Pine nuts	Wild rice	Brown rice
Sunflower seeds	Sesame seeds		

MINERALS

Zinc is a mineral that is an antioxidant, hence protective to the liver. Food sources of zinc are:

Oysters, fresh	Oats	Whole wheat	Brazil nuts
Pumpkin seeds	Peanuts	Rye	Split peas
Ginger root	Lima beans	Buckwheat	Walnuts
Pecans	Almonds	Filberts	Green peas

MINERALS CONTINUED

Magnesium is necessary for one of the main detoxification pathways in the liver, the P450 system. This system requires magnesium to function properly; therefore the liver as a whole benefits from this mineral. Food sources of magnesium are:

Kelp	Filberts	Buckwheat	Brewers' yeast
Wheat bran	Peanuts	Brazil nuts	Tofu
Wheat germ	Millet	Dulse	Blackstrap molasses
Almonds	Pecans	Coconut	Brown rice
Cashews	Walnuts	Soybeans	Rye

Selenium works with Vitamin E as an antioxidant. Foods high in selenium are:

Wheat germ/bran	Oats	Garlic	Barley
Brazil nuts	Molasses	Red Swiss chard	Turnips
Nutritional yeast	Brown rice	Orange juice	Shellfish

AMINO ACIDS

Methionine and Cysteine are amino acids known to protect the liver from damage by toxic chemicals. Many toxic substances are fat soluble, but if they are converted to a water-soluble substance they can be easily excreted from the body via the urine. The sulphur-containing amino acids methionine and cysteine are particularly adept at this. Food sources for these amino acids are:

Egg yolks	Onions	Sesame seeds
Red peppers	Broccoli	Whole grains
Garlic	Brussel sprouts	Legumes

VITAMIN-LIKE SUBSTANCES

Carnitine helps the liver in the metabolism of fats. It is necessary when there has been history of a high fat diet, high alcohol consumption, drug usage, or toxic exposure (remember that most toxins are fat soluble). Food sources of carnitine are:

Fish	Tempeh	Milk products
Poultry	Wheat	Avocados

Choline is also needed for the proper metabolism of fats by the liver. It also helps increase the solubility of the bile, which travels between the liver and the gall bladder. Food sources are:

Soybeans	Fish	Cabbage	Wheat germ
Egg yolk	Peanuts	Lentils	Lettuce
Nutritional yeast	Cauliflower	Chick peas	Brown rice

Inositol works closely with choline, assisting the liver in metabolizing fats and promoting smooth bile flow. Food sources of inositol include:

Citrus (except lemons)	Lentils	Blackstrap molasses
Brown rice	Wheat germ	Nutritional yeast
Chick peas	Oats	Raisins
Cantaloupe		

HERBS AND SPICES

Some herbs have been used for thousands of years in the treatment of liver disease; references have been found as far back as 600 B.C. Research in Japan, India, and Europe has confirmed the powerful actions of these herbs.

Ginger has been shown to decrease cholesterol in the liver and increase bile flow from the liver to the gall bladder. Ginger is also considered to be a liver tonic, therefore promoting liver health in general. The best way to purchase ginger is fresh and organic, if possible. This spice goes well mixed with a vegetable stir fry, in a carrot ginger soup or juice, in a baked spicy bread, or even as a tea on its own with a bit of honey.

Turmeric is in the same family as ginger. It has been found to have antioxidant properties, and current research shows it as a more powerful antioxidant than Vitamin E. It also assists in increasing bile secretion from the liver. It is more difficult to find fresh turmeric but it looks somewhat similar to ginger, although it is yellow with a bright orange interior. It is the ingredient in curry that gives it its characteristic yellow color but is not one of the hot spices. Turmeric mixed with ginger would go well on rice, or as a combination in soups or with vegetables.

Dandelion was used in the past as a “spring tonic,” the theory being that after a winter of eating heavy fattier foods, the body and blood were cleaned out with these greens. In fact this plant does have blood-cleansing properties and as the liver is prone to becoming fatty, the concept of using a spring tonic is still relevant and especially important with liver disease. Dandelion leaves go well in a salad. The whole plant including the root provides the best benefit, and this can be ground up into juice, mixed with carrot or apple for example. Another alternative is to dry the root and grind it with chicory root for use as a hot drink.

Milk Thistle The last herb mentioned here is not one that you will find in the spice department, but it is so beneficial to the liver, especially damaged livers, that it is worth mentioning. This plant has been found to actually regenerate damaged cells and increase DNA synthesis in the liver. Even more wonderful is that this effect does not occur with malignant cells. One of the best ways that I have found to include this as a food in my diet is in a seasoning salt. Milk thistle seeds can often be found in health food or herb stores. Seaweed can be bought bulk or packaged in health food stores.

Milk Thistle Seasoning Salt

You will need a clean coffee grinder for this, preferably one that is only used for grinding herbs. Coffee is hard on the liver, so you want to avoid getting any in your liver-loving seasoning salt.

½ cup milk thistle seeds

½ cup dried seaweed

1 cup of your favorite herbs (basil, oregano, dill, whatever you like!)

Grind the seeds first and put in a bowl. Grind the seaweed next. This is the trickiest part, and the drier the seaweed, the easier it will be. It doesn't matter if some of it is not entirely ground. Add the seaweed to the ground milk thistle seeds. Next grind the herbs. Add all the ingredients together and mix well. Keep this on the table where you eat, and sprinkle it on your food. It can be added during cooking too. The combination of milk thistle and seaweed is a dynamite one for liver health.

Source:

NCNM Natural Health Center patient handout

E.M Haas. Staying Healthy with Nutrition (Celestial Arts, Berkeley, CA) 1992.

B. Jensen. Foods that Heal (Avery Publishing Group Inc., Garden City Park, NY) 1993.

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