Liver Transplants

Why is the liver important?
The liver is the second largest organ in your body and is located under your rib cage on the right side. It weighs about three pounds and is shaped like a football that is flat on one side.

The liver performs many jobs in your body. It processes what you eat and drink into energy and nutrients your body can use. The liver also removes harmful substances from your blood.

What is a liver transplant?
A liver transplant is the process of replacing a sick liver with a donated, healthy liver. Liver transplants require that the blood type and body size of the donor match the person receiving the transplant.

Currently more than 6,000 liver transplants are performed each year in the United States. Liver transplant surgery usually takes between four and twelve hours. Most patients stay in the hospital for up to three weeks after surgery.

How do donated livers become available?
Donated livers come from living and non-living donors.

Living donors donate a part of their livers. The donated and the remaining part of the donor’s liver will grow to the size the body needs in weeks.

Most donated livers come from people who recently died and had no liver injury. Non-living donors either have agreed to be organ donors or their families decide after they have passed away.

When is a liver transplant needed?
A liver transplant is needed when a person’s liver is failing and a doctor recommends he or she be evaluated for a transplant. Many diseases can cause liver failure. Cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) is the most common reason for liver transplants. Other common reasons for liver transplants are:

- Chronic hepatitis B and chronic hepatitis C
- Bile duct diseases
- Genetic diseases
- Autoimmune liver diseases
- Primary liver cancer
- Alcoholic liver disease
- Fatty liver disease

How does a person become eligible for a liver transplant?
After being referred by a doctor to a transplant center, the transplant team evaluates the person’s overall physical and mental health, plan to pay for transplant related medical expenses, and emotional
support family and friends will provide. Based on the findings, the team decides if the person is eligible for a liver transplant.

If the person is eligible, the center will add him or her to the national transplant waiting list. The waiting list is prioritized so the sickest people are at the top of the list.

**How long does a person wait for a liver transplant?**
The waiting time for a liver transplant is different for each person. The time a person spends on the waiting list depends on his or her blood type, body size, stage of liver disease, overall health, and the availability of a matching liver. In the United States, there are more people who need a liver transplant than there are donated livers. There are currently over 16,000 Americans on the waiting list for a liver transplant.

**What are the risks of a liver transplant?**
The most common risks associated with liver transplants are the body rejecting the liver and infections.

Rejection occurs when the body’s immune system attacks an object it does not recognize. To prevent rejection, transplant patients are given medicines to weaken the immune system. Modern medications have made rejection less of a concern in liver transplant patients.

Rejection medications may have side effects of increased blood pressure, headaches, diarrhea, and nausea. Also, because rejection medications weaken the immune system, it can be hard for liver transplant patients to fight infections. However, most infections can be treated with medications.

**What is the outlook for liver transplant patients?**
Most patients return to a regular lifestyle six months to a year after a successful liver transplant.

Eating a healthy diet, exercising regularly, and taking recommended medications are important factors to staying healthy.

Nearly 75% of liver transplant patients are alive five years after their transplants. In some patients, the liver disease they had before the transplant comes back and they may need treatment or another transplant.

**What can people do to help those who need a liver transplant?**
People can help by registering to be an organ donor. To obtain an organ donor card, please visit: [www.organdonor.gov](http://www.organdonor.gov).