

Liver Transplantation Frequently Asked Questions

Which are the most common liver diseases?

In adults, cirrhosis of the liver is one of the most common reasons for which liver transplantation is performed. In children, the disease most often treated by liver transplantation is biliary atresia.

What is the treatment for liver disease?

There are effective medicines used for the treatment and complications of liver diseases. If the liver is not failing, treatment for complications of the liver disease may be all that is required. Frequent medical treatment can delay, but not eliminate, the need for transplantation.

When is liver transplantation a recommendation for treatment?

If medical treatment allows prolonged survival with good quality of life transplantation would be reserved for the future. Ideally transplantation is performed *before* the terminal stage of the disease when the patient would be too ill to withstand major surgery and would not survive the wait for a suitable donor.

How is the decision for transplant made?

Once the transplant physician determines that transplantation is the most suitable treatment option, the patient undergoes a transplant evaluation by our Transplant Team in conjunction with the patient's primary care physician. The patient and family's input is very important in this process and they must clearly understand the risks involved with proceeding to transplantation.

Are there any major risks involved?

With transplantation there are risks common to all forms of major surgery, as well as technical difficulties in removing the diseased liver and implanting the donor liver. One of the major risks for the patient is not having any liver function for a brief period. Immediately after surgery, bleeding, poor function of the grafted liver, and infections are major risks. The patient is carefully monitored for several weeks for signs of rejection of the liver.

What is the recovery time?

This depends on how ill the patient was prior to the surgery. Most patients should plan on spending a 4 to 5 days in the intensive care unit, and about 10 to 12 days in the hospital transplant unit.

What happens during the recovery period?

In the intensive care unit there is very careful monitoring of all body functions including the liver. Once the patient is transferred to the hospital transplant unit, the frequency of blood testing, etc. is decreased, eating is allowed and physical therapy is used to regain muscle strength. Medications to prevent rejection are initially given by vein, but later by mouth. Frequent tests will be done to monitor liver function and detect any evidence of rejection.

If a transplanted liver fails to function or is rejected, what can be done?

A failing transplanted liver can be replaced by a second (or even third) transplant.

Do recipients of liver transplants take medicines to prevent rejection for the rest of their lives?

Yes, however, as the body adjusts to the transplanted liver, the amount of medicine needed to control rejection is reduced.

What is the medical follow-up after transplantation?

Routine follow-up consists of regular blood tests to detect sign of rejection or other complications. You will be scheduled to see your transplant surgeon on a regular basis. You will also need to be followed by your own physician. *It is very important to keep all your medical appointments.*

Is there a chance of recurrence of the original disease in the new transplanted liver?

If the disease was caused by hepatitis B or C viruses then recurrence is likely. Other types of liver disease do not recur.

Do the donor and the recipient have to be matched by tissue type?

For liver transplants, the only requirements are that the donor and recipient need to be approximately the same size, and of compatible blood types. No other matching is necessary.

What lifestyle changes are necessary after a liver transplant?

Most patients can return to a normal or near-normal lifestyle 6 months to 1 year after a successful liver transplant. When practical, transplant recipients should avoid exposure to people with infections. Maintaining a balanced diet, getting regular exercise and staying on prescribed medications are all important ways to stay healthy.