Gastroenterology Directorate

PATIENT INFORMATION

Outpatient Liver Biopsy

Your Consultant or doctor has advised you to have a liver biopsy.

What is a liver biopsy?

A biopsy is a tiny sample of body tissue, in this case liver tissue. This tissue is viewed under a microscope.

What are the benefits of a liver biopsy?

It helps the doctor to make an exact diagnosis and determine the extent of your condition. It is a vital piece of information to help decide on your management and treatment.

What are the risks of a liver biopsy?

In most instances, a liver biopsy is obtained quickly with no problems. However,

- Occasionally some pain in the right shoulder is experienced.
- You may have a slight swelling or bruise over the biopsy area.
- Rarely, the needle can puncture a blood vessel or bile duct. The risk of significant bleeding is less than 1 in 500. It can be serious enough to require an operation and very rarely, death has been reported due to complications (studies have shown this to happen in about one in 10,000 times). This risk should be balanced against the risks of not doing a biopsy.
- Injury to lungs, intestine or gallbladder can also rarely occur.
- We take every precaution to make the biopsy as safe as possible for you.

Are there any alternatives to this procedure?

This is the only procedure for obtaining tissue from the liver.

What will happen if I don’t have this procedure done?

It will be difficult for the doctor to diagnose what is the matter with you and you may get worse if your problem cannot be treated.

What anaesthetic or sedation will I be given?

You will be given a local anaesthetic. Local anaesthesia is drug-induced numbness: it may be provided by an anaesthetist, surgeon or other healthcare professional, depending on the technique used.
Serious side effects are rare, and include fits, low blood pressure, slowed breathing and changes in heartbeat, which may be life-threatening. If you have any concerns about any of these effects, you should discuss them with your doctor.

The risks of anaesthesia and surgery are lower for those who are undergoing minor surgery, and who are young, fit, active and well.

You will be given an opportunity to discuss anaesthetic options and risks before your surgery.

If you are worried about any of these risks, please speak to your Consultant or a member of their team.

Getting ready for your liver biopsy

• A pre-biopsy assessment visit will be arranged for you. At this visit you will have blood samples taken. It is also an opportunity for you to discuss the biopsy procedure with a senior nurse.
• You will have an ultrasound scan performed before your liver biopsy.

Your liver biopsy

Your liver biopsy will be performed on the Gastroenterology Unit as a day case. On arrival, a nurse will check your details and you will be asked to change into a gown. Sometimes the biopsy is done with the help of an ultrasound scan to biopsy a particular part of the liver or to avoid other structures. You will probably be familiar with this test, which involves using a probe with jelly on your tummy to ‘scan’ inside the abdomen.

• You will be asked to lie on a bed resting on your back.
• The doctor doing the biopsy will clean your skin and inject local anaesthetic to numb your skin and tissue below.
• A specially designed needle is inserted through your skin. At this point the doctor will tell you how to breathe.
• This needle is advanced into then out of the liver. This takes between one to two seconds.
• A slender core of tissue is removed with the needle and sent to the laboratory.

This entire procedure lasts between 15 and 20 minutes.

Will I feel anything?

You may have pain or discomfort during or after the liver biopsy. This can be in the stomach, chest or right shoulder. However, this is usually temporary and medication can be given to relieve this.

After the liver biopsy

• A sticking plaster will be placed over the biopsy area.
• You will be asked to lie on your right side, so that the weight of your body presses onto the wound.
• You will need to remain in bed for six hours.
A member of the nursing staff will regularly monitor your blood pressure, pulse and biopsy area.

Results

The liver biopsy will be processed by the pathology laboratory, which can take anything between one and three weeks for all the tests to be arranged. The results will be discussed with you during your follow-up appointment in clinic.

Cancellations

If you are unable to keep this appointment, please let us know as soon as possible on 0151 706 2720. We will be able to give your appointment to another patient, and arrange another for you.

Transport

- Transport has not been arranged for this appointment so it will be necessary for you to make your own arrangements.
- If you have been referred to us from clinic and usually have an ambulance to bring you for your appointment, please contact us on 0151 706 2720 as soon as possible.
- If you have been referred to us by your GP and require an ambulance please contact their surgery.

Going Home

Once you have completed the recovery stage you can usually go home, preferably with someone with you. You will be given a liver biopsy aftercare leaflet and contact number if you should have any questions or queries.

Further appointments

If you do not already have an appointment to return to clinic to see your doctor, we will ensure that a follow-up clinic appointment is sent to you usually between four to six weeks.

Further information:

If you have any questions or queries, please contact

Sister Devina Mallon  
Tel: 0151 706 2725 or  
Tel: 0151 706 2000 and ask for bleep 596  
Fax: 0151 706 5879  
The A/E Department is open 24 hours.  

Author: Gastroenterology Directorate  
Date: August 2004  
Review Date: September 2006

This leaflet is available in large print, computer disc, Braille, audiocassette and other languages on request.