

## highlights

- *Diagnosis usually involves laboratory tests, x rays and ultrasounds.*
- *Most animals will require hospitalisation for supportive treatment while waiting for test results.*
- *Most liver disease is life threatening and requires urgent treatment.*
- *Complete cure is not always possible. Sometimes a chronic liver disease will result from an acute episode. This may require constant ongoing medication to maintain quality of life.*
- *Dietary management is essential after liver disease. With modified diets it is possible to encourage liver regeneration and improve metabolism and so improve well being. These diets are often required for the life of the animal.*

## Client information series

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# liver disease in dogs and cats

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# liver disease in dogs and cats

Often termed “the body factory”, the liver is involved with many metabolic functions. It manufactures essential proteins, bile and clotting factors, it controls metabolism and use of food substances and it detoxifies the blood by removing toxic metabolic waste.

Liver disease is any destructive or metabolic disorder involving the liver and is not usually limited by age or breed although there are a few inherited metabolic diseases of the liver seen in dogs.

There are many **causes** of liver disease. Often a specific diagnosis will be difficult. Some causes include:

- Bacterial or viral infections
- Poisonous substances eaten
- Altered blood flow to the liver as a result of heart disease or inherited abnormalities
- Storage diseases– metabolic disorders seen specifically in some breeds of dog.
- Fat build up within the liver (hepatic lipidosis)- a common problem in both dogs and cats. The cause of this is poorly understood.

**Clinical Signs:** The most common signs of

liver disease in dogs and cats include:

- Loss of appetite and weight loss
- Depression
- Jaundice (yellow colouration of gums, eyes and skin)
- Increased thirst
- Dark coloured urine

Other signs of liver disease can be ascites (fluid build up within the abdominal cavity), pale gums and bleeding disorders.

Clinical signs may occur rapidly, or over a long period of time. There are other diseases which cause similar clinical pictures and it is important to determine as accurate a diagnosis as possible.

**Diagnosis** of liver disease is made on the basis of history and clinical symptoms and confirmed by blood tests which evaluate liver function. Urine analysis and abdominal fluid analysis, X rays, ultrasounds and occasionally exploratory surgery with biopsies may also be required to accurately diagnose the condition and allow more specific treatment and a forecast as to life expectancy.

Often it is necessary to commence supportive treatment whilst the diagnostic tests are carried out as the animal is usually severely ill.

The **treatment** of liver failure has three main objectives.

1) Maintain the life of the animal with supportive therapy until adequate liver function returns.

2) Minimise the harmful effects of the damaging agent on the liver

3) Encourage regeneration of liver cells and improve liver function.

Supportive treatment usually involves hospitalization for intensive intravenous fluid therapy to help

maintain body hydration whilst flushing toxic metabolic products through the kidneys. Often animals are unable to eat or drink as they are extremely nauseous or vomiting due to severe concurrent digestive upsets. Maintaining electrolyte balances helps the rest of the body organs cope with the disease process and may serve to protect them from injury in turn. Symptomatic treatment with medication to control vomiting, to help the liver expel bile acids, to control pain may also be required. In the case of bacterial infections, antibiotics are also used. Congenital disorders are sometimes surgically correctable (e.g. Portosystemic shunt), but may require permanent treatment. Chronic liver disease may result from an acute condition. Chronic disease is usually not curable. It requires permanent medication and dietary modification to maintain quality of life. Cancer of the liver often results in rapid progression of the disease in spite of treatment and is usually fatal.

**Dietary management** is often essential in treatment and control of liver diseases.

The goal of dietary management is to reduce signs of sickness associated with liver failure, and at the same time provide optimal conditions for regeneration and repair of liver cells. This involves feeding diets with highly digestible carbohydrate energy sources and restricted protein and fat levels. There are a number of diets manufactured specifically to meet these requirements Your veterinarian will determine the most appropriate diet for your pet and it is essential to stick to the diet and medications prescribed.