



Autoimmune Hepatitis

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 does “autoimmune” mean?

Autoimmune is an immune response by the body against its own tissue, cells, or molecules. In people with autoimmune disease, their immune system may attack the same cells it is supposed to protect.

What does “hepatitis” mean?

Hepatitis is the swelling of the liver. It can lead to cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), and liver failure.

What is autoimmune hepatitis?

Autoimmune hepatitis is a chronic (long-term) liver disease in which the immune system attacks the liver. Autoimmune hepatitis can lead to cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) and liver failure if it is not treated.

There are two types of autoimmune hepatitis:

- Type 1(classic) autoimmune hepatitis
 - more common form
 - mostly affects young women
 - often develops suddenly
 - often occurs with other autoimmune diseases
- Type 2 autoimmune hepatitis
 - less common
 - generally affects girls between the ages of two and fourteen
 - often occurs with other autoimmune diseases

What causes autoimmune hepatitis?

The cause of autoimmune hepatitis is unknown. Scientists are continuing to research why the body attacks itself. They believe that genetics and past infections may be causes of autoimmune hepatitis.

Who is at risk for autoimmune hepatitis?

Women between the ages of 15 and 40 are at highest risk for autoimmune hepatitis, but people of other ages may also be affected. About 70% of people with autoimmune hepatitis are women.

What are symptoms of autoimmune hepatitis?

Symptoms of autoimmune hepatitis may include:

- Fatigue (the most common symptom)
- Abdominal pain
- Aching joints
- Severe itching
- Jaundice (yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes)
- Swollen liver
- Nausea
- Spider-like blood vessels on the skin
- Dark urine
- Loss of appetite
- Pale stools

What are the complications of autoimmune hepatitis?

Complications of autoimmune hepatitis if it progresses to cirrhosis may include:

- Ascites (fluid in the abdomen)
- Mental confusion
- Stoppage of menstrual periods in women
- Internal bleeding

How is autoimmune hepatitis diagnosed?

Autoimmune hepatitis is diagnosed using different tests which may include:

Test	Checks for:
Blood test	Abnormalities
Liver biopsy (a small piece of liver tissue is removed and studied in the lab)	Severity of liver damage

How is autoimmune hepatitis treated?

Autoimmune hepatitis is treated with medications that slow down the body's overactive immune system. Doctors often recommend prednisone (a type of steroid) or azathioprine or (another medication that may be used for the treatment). Doctors also may prescribe mycophenolate instead of azathioprine.

In most cases, these medications can help control autoimmune hepatitis. Many patients will need to take medication for years, and sometimes for life. Long-term use of steroid treatment can cause serious side effects including diabetes, osteoporosis (thinning of bones), high blood pressure, glaucoma (vision loss), weight gain, anxiety, thinning of the hair and skin and weakened immune system. Other medications may be needed to control these side effects. Doctors work with patients to keep steroids at the lowest possible dose or use only azathioprine to manage autoimmune hepatitis.