

Article 1345

Overview

A liver biopsy involves taking a small piece of tissue from the liver with a special needle. The sample is examined for signs of damage or disease.

Who is a candidate for the test?

The healthcare provider may order a liver biopsy if a person is suspected of having potentially serious liver disease.

How is the test performed?

A liver biopsy is a form of minor surgery that is usually done in the hospital. An intravenous line, or IV, is started in one of the veins. The person is then commonly given a sedative and pain medicine. The healthcare provider will inject local anesthesia to numb the person's right side near the ribs. For a needle biopsy of the liver, a thin needle is then inserted. A small piece of liver tissue is drawn out through the needle. The provider may use an ultrasound to guide the needle insertion. Pressure is applied to the puncture site to prevent bleeding, and the site is bandaged. Two less common methods for liver biopsy involve more extensive surgery. A laparoscopic biopsy is done by inserting a lighted tube through an incision into the abdomen. A transvenous biopsy is done through a catheter that is inserted into a neck vein.

What is involved in preparation for the test?

The healthcare provider will give specific instructions. In general, medicines that cause blood thinning are stopped a week before the test. These include coumadin, ibuprofen, and aspirin. The individual may be told to fast for 8 hours before the test.

What do the test results mean?

Abnormalities on a liver biopsy can identify several disorders, including:

- » alcoholic liver disease
- » cancer of the liver
- » cirrhosis, which is a chronic disease causing scarring of the liver
- » hemochromatosis, which causes a buildup of iron in the liver
- » hepatitis
- » tuberculosis, an infection that usually begins in the lungs
- » Wilson disease, in which copper builds up in the liver
- » autoimmune liver disease (like lupus)