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# Liver detox diets and Traditional Chinese Medicine: Do they work?

*Dr Alice Lam*

“Detox diets”, supplements and Traditional Chinese Medicine are marketed as beneficial for the liver, but do they work?

First let’s look at where the liver is and what it does.

## Liver anatomy

The liver is a large organ in your upper right belly, usually protected by the ribs. It weighs about 1.5kg and connects with the gallbladder, pancreas and

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intestines.

Its functions include:

- producing bile to help digest fats
- making proteins for the blood
- turning excess glucose into glycogen for energy storage and later release
- regulating blood clotting
- working as part of the immune system
- breaking down toxins and drugs.

## Detox diets

Also known as a liver cleanse or flush, some people believe a detox diet helps remove excess waste after too much alcohol, unhealthy foods, or just for daily liver health. The first days may begin with fasting or drinking fluids only. Most detox diets take out processed food from your diet and may include commercial products, such as herbal supplements.

Some people feel better on these diets, often simply due to eating more healthily. This might cause them to believe that the liver cleanse works, but it's important to consider the following:

- If the diet requires drinking lots of juice and you have kidney disease or diabetes, this might be harmful. As some juices are high in sugar this can also be unhealthy for the average person.
- If the diet involves fasting, you may feel dizzy and weak.
- If you have liver damage from hepatitis B or C, this could worsen the damage<sup>1,2</sup>.

Co-Chairs, Tim Wilson, MP and Senator Louise Pratt invite you to a Parliamentary Morning Tea on Thursday 12 November.

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## Renewed calls for Needle & Syringe Programs in prisons ahead of International Drug Users Day

The Australian Injecting and Illicit Drug Users League (AIVL) and Hepatitis Australia are highlighting international calls for Needle and Syringe Programs (NSPs) in prisons, along with a greater focus on harm reduction initiatives, ahead of International Drug Users Day on 1 November.

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## Investment in hepatitis research needs to be accompanied by National Strategy implementation funding

6 October 2020 - Hepatitis Australia welcomes the Australian Government's commitment to diverse hepatitis research, however we remain concerned

- Not enough scientific trials have been done on detox diets to advise on their safety and risks<sup>3</sup>.

For most people following a healthy lifestyle, the liver is well equipped to remove day-to-day toxins and you don't need to do a detox.

## Supplements

Some studies in animals show **milk thistle** decreases liver inflammation, and **turmeric** protects against liver injury. However, there haven't been enough studies done on humans to recommend their use in prevention of liver disease<sup>4</sup>.

The US National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH) advises that milk thistle can cause allergic reactions in some people or low blood sugar in people living with diabetes<sup>5</sup>.

We should also remember that detox products and liver supplements may not be standardised. Products could have different strengths and be of varying quality. Some may interact with medication or have side effects including causing liver damage.

## Traditional Chinese Medicine

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) views the liver in terms of vital energy (qi) and the storage of blood (xue). Together with the scheme of Yin Yang, TCM practitioners may diagnose liver disorders, and offer treatments like acupuncture or herbs<sup>6</sup>.

There is no evidence that **acupuncture** helps people with liver conditions. However, it is relatively safe if performed correctly<sup>7</sup>.

that the 2019 Health Budget funding for hepatitis commitments is yet to hit the ground.

## Related

### Hepatitis B Guide

Testing, treatment and staying healthy. This guide is to help you understand the process from being tested for hepatitis B (often called hep B) to living well with chronic (life-long) hep B.

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### What is hepatitis B?

Basic information about hepatitis B transmission and how it affects people.

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### Hepatitis B vaccination

Hepatitis B can be prevented with a safe and effective vaccine.

Because there have been very few good quality studies, we have no strong proof that **Chinese herbal products** work for liver health. Some products have also been found to have been contaminated with plant or animal material, drugs like the blood-thinner warfarin, and heavy metals like arsenic. Some products can even contain the wrong herbs, which may damage the liver<sup>8</sup>.

Therefore, it is very important that you are confident of what is in the Chinese herbs you buy. If you decide to use Chinese herbs or other supplements, it is advisable that you talk to your doctor, especially if you have hepatitis B or C, or other chronic diseases.

Finally, the best way to look after your liver is maintain a healthy weight, follow a balanced diet, exercise regularly, minimise alcohol intake, and avoid smoking.

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## Most read

### **Coronavirus COVID-19 factsheet for people with hepatitis B and hepatitis C**

Hepatitis Australia has put together a brief factsheet with information about the coronavirus COVID-19 for people living with hepatitis B and hepatitis C.

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### **Hepatitis A**

Basic information about hepatitis A in Australia

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### **COVID-19**

Information on the coronavirus COVID-19 for people affected by hepatitis B or hepatitis C.

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