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Liver Biopsy

Liver biopsy allows a small sample of liver tissue to be obtained which can be processed and examined under a microscope. It is frequently the only means of precisely diagnosing a variety of liver conditions. Your doctor will usually recommend a liver biopsy only after a variety of other tests have failed to make a precise diagnosis. Liver biopsy may also be necessary to assess the progress of certain liver disorders.

How are you prepared?

It is essential that your blood clotting ability has been tested before the biopsy is carried out. You should not take blood thinning tablets such as Warfarin and Aspirin or arthritis tablets one week prior to your procedure.

What happens during a Liver Biopsy?

You will be given an anaesthetic sedation through a vein to make you relaxed and sleepy. The biopsy itself involves preparing the skin over the right lower ribs with an antiseptic solution. A local anaesthetic is then injected into the area. The skin should be numb in a few minutes. Subsequently, the liver biopsy needle is passed quickly in and out of the liver. It is essential that you follow the instructions of the doctor performing the biopsy regarding holding your breath for a second or two during the actual procedure.

Safety and Risks

Complications of liver biopsy can include bleeding or leakage of bile into the abdominal cavity from the puncture site. Usually such bleeding will stop without intervention; however, occasionally blood transfusion may be required. In extremely rare cases of severe bleeding, an operation may be necessary to stop the bleeding.

Other complications include damage to other organs such as the right lung, gall bladder or bowel. Another rare complication of liver biopsy is stimulation of the vagal nerve which can result in fainting. Reactions to the sedation are also a possibility. Death is a remote possibility, as with any interventional procedure. If you wish to have further details of any of these complications, you should contact your doctor before the procedure to allow all possible complications to be discussed in detail.

After the liver biopsy

If you do not stay in hospital overnight following your procedure, you should not stay alone. In the case of severe pain, abdominal distention, faintness or shortness of breath, you should not hesitate in contacting either your doctor or the hospital for further advice.

Appointment Preparation

Two to three hours prior to your procedure you must eat a small fatty breakfast - e.g. bacon, sausages and eggs and avocado and/or cheese.