



Seeing Your Healthcare Practitioner About Alpha-1 Liver Disease

When you have Alpha-1, you may want to see a doctor for a number of reasons:

- You don't feel well.
- Your health has changed.
- You're concerned about a specific problem or symptom.
- You're expecting a child, and are concerned about genetic risks

Whatever your reason for seeking medical care, knowing what to expect can help your first visit go smoothly.

Typically, your first visit will include a medical history, a physical exam, and some [lab tests](#). These will help determine if there's a problem with your liver function.

First, your doctor will take your medical history

Your doctor usually starts by checking your health history for signs of liver problems that may have gone unnoticed. They'll start by asking about your health — and the health of family members. They're looking for things like:

- Jaundice (yellow skin and eyes) as an infant, child, or adult
- Surgeries or hospitalizations
- Gallstones or kidney stones
- Blood transfusions
- Serious injuries
- Significant health events

Risk factors for liver disease

During your visit, your doctor will review risk factors that can have a big influence on liver health, like

- cancer
- immune diseases
- alcohol and drug use



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- [exposure to toxic chemicals at work](#)
- medicines, herbs, and dietary supplements
- exposure to Hepatitis A, B, or C

Note: They'll also ask if you've gotten [vaccinations](#) for Hepatitis A and B

Next, your doctor will ask about symptoms

Your doctor will want to know about specific symptoms that point to liver problems:

- **Diarrhea:** Common in adults and children with abnormal bile flow and fat digestion.
- **Itching:** Common in patients with significant liver disease. When your liver doesn't remove waste products from the blood, they build up within your skin and cause itching.
- **Abdominal pain, indigestion, or vomiting:** Common in patients with liver disease.
- **Unusual bleeding:** May be related to poor vitamin K absorption or poor liver synthetic function.
- **Sleepiness or lack of alertness:** May be caused by "portal hypertension," which is a type of high blood pressure in the portal vein.
- **Blood in vomit or stool:** May be caused by "portal hypertension," which is a type of high blood pressure. It happens when scar tissue in your liver disrupts blood flow between your intestine and your liver. Other symptoms of portal hypertension include a swollen, bloated belly.

Other ways Alpha-1 affects your body

If your liver is unhealthy, your body may not get the nutrients it needs. This affects your skin and hair. Cuts and scrapes may take a long time to heal. Your hair may be dry or dull.



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Your doctor can order lab tests to assess your nutritional status. They can also take key measurements to assess whether you're getting the nutrients you need, including:

- Height and weight
- Body fat percentage
- Lean muscle mass
- Body Mass Index (BMI)

Alpha-1, alcohol, and your liver: Any history of potential liver problems will include questions about how much alcohol you consume. Heavy drinking is the leading cause of liver problems in the world.

Finally, your doctor will give you a physical exam

During your physical exam, your doctor will look for specific signs of liver disease. These include:

Rashes and signs of scratching: As mentioned earlier, the build-up of waste in the skin often causes itching.

Jaundice: A build-up of a waste product called bilirubin can give your skin and eyes a yellowish color. Newborns often have jaundice that's unrelated to Alpha-1 liver disease. Their livers aren't mature enough to handle the bilirubin caused by the breakdown of red blood cells. If your baby is born with jaundice, there are tests to find out what's causing it.

Clusters of veins: Some patients with liver disease have unusual clusters of veins on their skin, but very few other symptoms. Portal hypertension can also cause large, blood-filled veins near the belly button.

Swelling in the feet and hands: Liver problems may cause abnormal fluid and salt retention. This may lead to swelling of the hands and feet.



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Other signs of liver disease

A change in heart and lung function: Liver-related problems can affect both your heart and lungs.

Enlarged or painful liver: Your doctor can learn a lot about your liver health by examining your abdomen. They can feel if it's gotten bigger. It may be painful to the touch or feel rough through the skin. It may be harder than normal or have an unusual shape. Any of these findings might be a sign of liver disease.

A swollen abdomen: Your abdomen may be swollen for a number of reasons. Abnormal blood flow due to portal hypertension may cause your spleen to swell. Fluid, called ascites, can also build up in your abdomen. Ascites are a sign of pretty severe liver disease. Your doctor can feel it during your physical exam.

Hemorrhoids: Enlarged and painful blood vessels around your anus and rectum may point to portal hypertension.

After taking your medical history and doing a physical exam, your doctor will most likely order [blood tests](#). Doing so will help them get a complete picture of your liver health.

For more in-depth information on this topic, please visit the [Big Fat Reference Guide \(BFRG\)](#). If you are enrolled in AlphaNet's Subscriber Portal, you can access the BFRG [here](#).

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