

Autoimmune Hepatitis

What Is Autoimmune Hepatitis?

Autoimmune hepatitis (AIH) is a chronic autoimmune disease where the body's immune system mistakenly attacks liver cells, causing inflammation and potential liver damage. Over time, this inflammation can lead to scarring (fibrosis) or severe complications like cirrhosis and liver failure if left untreated. The exact cause of AIH is not fully understood, but it is thought to be influenced by a combination of genetic and environmental factors.

There are two main types of autoimmune hepatitis:

- **Type 1:** This is the most common form and can occur at any age. It is more common in women than in men.
- **Type 2:** This form typically affects children and young adults but is less common overall.

Symptoms Of Autoimmune Hepatitis

Autoimmune hepatitis can cause a wide range of symptoms, and in some cases, people may not have any noticeable signs until the condition has progressed. Some common symptoms include:

- **Fatigue:** One of the most common symptoms, fatigue can significantly affect daily life.
- **Jaundice:** Yellowing of the skin and eyes, caused by the build-up of bilirubin in the blood due to liver damage.
- **Abdominal pain:** Typically felt in the upper right side of the abdomen.
- **Joint pain:** Many people with autoimmune hepatitis experience joint discomfort, often in the knees or hands.
- **Nausea and loss of appetite:** Digestive issues can be an early sign of liver inflammation.
- **Dark urine and pale stools:** Changes in urine and stool colour may indicate liver dysfunction.
- **Itchy skin:** A common sign of liver disease in general.

- **Unexplained weight loss:** This may be a result of reduced appetite or chronic illness.

Causes And Risk Factors

While the exact cause of autoimmune hepatitis is not fully understood, several factors may contribute to its development:

- **Genetics:** A family history of autoimmune diseases can increase the risk of developing autoimmune hepatitis.
- **Hormones:** Women are more likely to develop autoimmune hepatitis, possibly due to hormonal factors.
- **Infections:** Viral infections, such as hepatitis A or B, may trigger an autoimmune response in susceptible individuals.
- **Environmental factors:** Exposure to certain medications or toxins may play a role in triggering the disease.

Diagnosis Of Autoimmune Hepatitis

Autoimmune hepatitis is often diagnosed using a combination of blood tests, imaging, and sometimes a liver biopsy:

- **Blood tests:** These can reveal elevated liver enzymes, which indicate liver inflammation, and may also detect specific antibodies that suggest an autoimmune condition.
- **Imaging:** Ultrasounds, MRI scans, or CT scans may be used to assess the structure of the liver and rule out other conditions.
- **Liver biopsy:** In some cases, a biopsy is needed to confirm the diagnosis and determine the extent of liver damage.

Treatment Options

The goal of treatment is to stop the immune system from attacking the liver, reducing inflammation and

preventing further damage. Common treatments include:

- **Immunosuppressive medications:** Drugs such as corticosteroids (e.g., prednisone) are often the first line of treatment to reduce inflammation and suppress the immune response. These may be combined with other medications like azathioprine to help control the disease.
- **Liver transplant:** In severe cases where liver damage has progressed to cirrhosis or liver failure, a liver transplant may be necessary.

Prognosis

With appropriate treatment, many people with autoimmune hepatitis can achieve remission, meaning the inflammation in the liver is reduced or eliminated. However, the condition often requires lifelong monitoring and medication to prevent relapses.

Why Choose Birmingham Liver Clinic?

At Birmingham Liver Clinic, our multidisciplinary team of hepatologists and liver surgeons offers expert care for autoimmune hepatitis. Our consultants have extensive experience in diagnosing and treating liver diseases and work closely with patients to develop personalised treatment plans. We use the latest diagnostic techniques and treatments to manage autoimmune hepatitis effectively and minimise the risk of long-term liver damage.

In cases where advanced liver disease or complications arise, our team, which includes HPB (hepato-pancreato-biliary) surgeons and hepatologists, is skilled in offering advanced treatment options, including liver transplant assessments and surgery if needed.

Contact Us

If you are experiencing symptoms of autoimmune hepatitis or need further care, please contact Birmingham Liver Clinic to schedule a consultation. Our expert team is here to provide comprehensive, compassionate care for all your liver health needs.