Yoga and Dietary Tips for Good Liver Health
by Meggan Brummer

According to Ayurvedic principles, the liver is the principal site of agni (bodily fire) and provides energy for all other functions of the body. Similarly, in Chinese Medicine, the Liver is responsible for the smooth flow of Qi or energy around the body. There is no doubt that this, the largest organ in the body, plays a crucial role in our health and wellbeing.

Not only is it the major fat-burning organ in the body, the liver is also responsible for maintaining blood sugar levels, storing important vitamins, iron and copper, regulating the proteins which cause the blood to clot when necessary and detoxifying toxic substances. Keeping the liver from becoming sluggish can be a preventative to a large number of ailments.

How do I Know if my Liver is Sluggish?
There are many signs that could be indicative of a sluggish liver. Some of these include:
- A sluggish digestive system;
- Being overweight;
- A sluggish metabolism;
- Indigestion;
- Irritable bowel syndrome;
- Abdominal bloating;
- Unpleasant moods, particularly depression and a 'foggy head';
- Frequent fatigue or chronic fatigue;
- Allergies;
- Headaches;
- Sugar cravings/Hypoglycaemia or unstable blood sugar levels;
- An overburdened immune system;
- Costed tongue and bad breath – Ayurvedically-speaking, a healthy tongue is pink, clear and has no white coating.

Diet Tips for the Liver Lover
- Avoid oily foods;
- Avoid tea and coffee;
- Avoid alcohol;
- Increase the use of cumin, fennel, caraway, lemon, pomegranate, ginger, laurel leaves, plums and figs in your diet;
- Eat only when you are hungry;
- Drink eight to ten glasses of filtered water a day, in-between and not during meals;
- Avoid refined sugars such as artificial sweeteners, jams, and sweet preserves;
- Do not re-heat food. Eat freshly cooked food as much as possible;
- Increase your Vitamin C intake as it is the most powerful antioxidant vitamin for the liver and reduces toxic damage to the liver cells;
- Drink green tea and dandelion tea.

Yoga Asanas
The following yoga asanas are particularly beneficial for strengthening a sluggish liver, and should be practised on an empty stomach. Remember, allow four hours to digest a heavy meal, and at least 2½ hours to digest a light meal, before practising yoga.

Meru Wakrasana – Spinal Twist
Sit with your legs stretched out in front of you. Take a deep breath in. Hold the breath as you twist to your right side first, placing your hands on the
ground behind you, keeping the right hand close to the left buttock with the fingers pointing away from the body and bending the right arm slightly. Bend the left knee and take the left foot across the right leg, placing the foot on the ground on the outside of the right leg. Twist as far to your right as you can, using your arms to lever yourself. Make sure you keep the spine straight and the buttocks on the ground. As you hold the asana relax your back. When you need to breathe in, return the body to a central position as you inhale. Practise this five times on the same side, and then take a few relaxing breaths in a comfortable neutral sitting position before practising the same asana five times on the other side.

Similarly to Bhu Namanasana, Meru Wakrasana is a preparatory asana for Ardha Matsyendrasana. It is advisable to practice Meru Wakrasana before attempting any inverted asanas.

Bhu Namanasana – Spinal Twist Prostration Pose

- Sit on the ground keeping your spine straight and legs outstretched. Take a deep breath in and then hold the breath as you twist to your right, placing both of your hands on the ground to the side of your right hip and using the arms and shoulders as levers. Twist the trunk of the body to a 90 degree angle.
- Slowly, as you exhale, bend the torso down towards your hands and take your forehead towards the ground. If possible, place the forehead on the ground, keeping the buttocks on the ground. Hold the breath as you hold the asana for a short time, relaxing the back and when you need to breathe in come up as you inhale. Exhale as you centre the body. Repeat the movement on the other side. This constitutes one round. Repeat five rounds, synchronizing the movement with the breath.

As this asana is not as advanced as Ardha Matsyendrasana it can be used as a warm up spinal twisting asana at the beginning of a series of spinal twists.

Bhu Namanasana should be avoided by women more than two months pregnant. Expert guidance is advisable for those with hernia or peptic ulcer.

Merudandasana – Spinal Column Pose

Sit with your legs stretched out in front of you, then bend your knees and place your feet on the ground close to your buttocks and hip distance apart from each other. Take hold of your big toes. Slowly lean back, balancing on your coccyx. As you gain your balance, begin to straighten your legs and arms, raising your legs as you do so. Once you are steady, keeping the spine straight, separate your legs as much as you can. As you hold the final position, focus your eyes on a fixed point, but make sure that you keep the facial muscles relaxed and do not strain the eyes. When you are ready to come out of the asana, bring your legs together in front of the body, bend the legs, and lower the feet to the ground.

If you prefer not to hold the final pose for longer than one breath, then synchronize your breath with the movement by inhaling before you lift your legs, holding the breath as you lift and separate the legs and exhaling as you complete the asana, lowering the feet to the ground. Practise five rounds.

It is not advisable for those with high blood pressure, heart ailments, slipped disc or sciatica to practise Merudandasana.

Merudandasana tones all the abdominal organs, especially the liver, and strengthens the abdominal muscles.

Utthita Hasta Merudandasana – Raised Hand and Spine Pose

Utthita Hasta Merudandasana is a variation asana of Merudandasana, and so the instructions for it are just the same, except that once the legs are straight they are simply held there without separation. Hold for as long as you feel comfortable to. If you decide to hold the asana for an extended period of time, make sure you keep the breath moving slowly and deeply through the body.

Ardha Matsyendrasana – Half Spinal Twist

Sitting on the ground, stretch your legs out in front of you. Bend your left leg and fold it in towards the body, close to the right buttock. Then bend your right leg and place it on the outer side of your left leg, keeping it bent with the knee pointing skywards. Take your left arm to the outer side of your right leg and straighten it so that your left hand is
either holding or moving towards the right foot. Place your right hand on the ground behind you, aligning it with the spine but keeping it about a foot away from the spine. If you prefer, then bend your right arm and wrap it around the back of the body along the waist line. For those who are more flexible, move the right hand up the back and place it between the shoulder blades with the fingers pointing up. This helps to keep the spine straight and assists expansion into the chest area. Now take a deep breath in and breathe out as you twist the spine and look back over your right shoulder. If your right arm is still on the ground, then use it as a lever so that you can twist back as far as possible without having to use the back muscles. Do the same on the other side.

As you hold the pose, breathe deeply and slowly, without strain. Start by holding the pose for just two or three breaths on either side of the body and progress towards holding the pose for up to one minute on either side.

As with Bhujangasana, Ardha Matsyendrasana should be avoided by women more than two months pregnant, and expert guidance taken for those with hernia or peptic ulcer.

Other yoga poses that are great for the liver include paschimottanasana (Back Stretching Pose) and Ardha Padma Padmottanasana (Half lotus leg stretch pose).

The Purifying Power of the Breath

Negative emotions, such as anger, frustration, greed, jealousy and so on, are part of everyone’s life to varying degrees, but we need not be controlled by negative emotions. Notice how your breath becomes short when you are experiencing these emotions, how there is a feeling of contraction, of shrinking from within. If the knowledge from alternative medicines suggests that anger and frustration contaminate and weaken the liver, then we should be doing everything we can to stay calm and cool! This is where the breath comes in. According to spiritual master Sri Sri Ravi Shankar,4 each emotion has a corresponding pattern of breath, and with meditation, silence and the aid of breathing techniques, the source of negativity is nipped at the root. Yogic breathing practices work to eliminate and reduce negativity, both in the mind and emotions and, therefore, gaining a few skills in breathing techniques will have enormous benefits for the liver!

References

About the Author
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