

## **Fatty Liver**

Explore this section to learn more about fatty liver, what effect it has upon the liver's condition and ability to function, and how it can lead to more serious liver disease.

### **What is fatty liver?**

Fatty liver is just what its name suggests: the build-up of excess fat in the liver cells. It is normal for your liver to contain some fat. But if fat accounts for more than 10% of your liver's weight, then you have fatty liver and you may develop more serious complications.

Fatty liver may cause no damage, but sometimes the excess fat leads to inflammation of the liver. This condition, called steatohepatitis, does cause liver damage. Sometimes, inflammation from a fatty liver is linked to alcohol abuse; this is known as alcoholic steatohepatitis. Otherwise the condition is called nonalcoholic steatohepatitis, or NASH.

An inflamed liver may become scarred and hardened over time. This condition, called cirrhosis, is serious and often leads to liver failure.

*NASH is one of the top three leading causes of cirrhosis.*

### **What are the symptoms of fatty liver?**

A fatty liver produces no symptoms on its own, so people often learn about their fatty liver when they have medical tests for other reasons. NASH can damage your liver for years or even decades without causing any symptoms. If the disease gets worse, you may experience fatigue, weight loss, abdominal discomfort, weakness and confusion.

### **What causes fatty liver?**

Eating excess calories causes fat to build up in the liver. When the liver does not process and break down fats as it normally should, too much fat will accumulate. People tend to develop fatty liver if they have certain other conditions, such as obesity, diabetes, or high triglycerides. Alcohol abuse, rapid weight loss and malnutrition may also lead to fatty liver. However, some people develop fatty liver even if they have none of these conditions – so everyone should know about it.

### **How is fatty liver diagnosed?**

Your doctor may see something unusual in your blood test or notice that your liver is slightly enlarged during a routine checkup. These could be signs of a fatty liver. To make sure you don't have another liver disease, your doctor may ask for more blood tests, an ultrasound, a CT scan or an MRI. If other diseases are ruled out, you may be diagnosed with NASH. The only way to know for sure is to get a liver biopsy. Your doctor will remove a sample of liver tissue with a needle and check it under a microscope.

## **What new treatments for fatty liver are being studied?**

Fatty liver is currently the focus of intense research to provide us with better tools for treatment in the future. Scientists are studying whether various medications can help reduce the inflammation on your liver, including new diabetes medications that may help you even if you don't have diabetes.

## **How is fatty liver treated?**

There are no medical or surgical treatments for fatty liver, but there are some steps you can take that may help prevent or reverse some of the damage. In general, if you have fatty liver, and in particular if you have NASH, you should:

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- Lose weight – safely! That usually means losing no more than one or two pounds a week.
- Lower your triglycerides through diet, medication or both
- Avoid alcohol
- Control your diabetes, if you have it
- Eat a balanced, healthy diet
- Increase your physical activity
- Get regular checkups from a doctor who specializes in liver care

## **If I've been diagnosed with fatty liver, what questions should I ask my doctor?**

- “What is the likely cause of my fatty liver?”
- “Do I have NASH? If not, how likely am I to develop NASH?”
- “Do I have cirrhosis? If not, how likely am I to develop cirrhosis?”
- “Do I need to lose weight? How can I do so safely?”
- “Should I be taking any medication to control my triglyceride levels?”
- “What medications or other substances should I avoid to protect my liver?”

## **Who is at risk for fatty liver?**

Most (but not all) fatty liver patients are middle-aged and overweight. The risk factors most commonly linked to fatty liver disease are:

- Overweight (body mass index of 25-30)
- Obesity (body mass index above 30)
- Diabetes
- Elevated triglyceride levels

## **What is the best way to prevent fatty liver?**

The best way to reduce your risk of developing fatty liver is to maintain a healthy weight and normal triglyceride levels. You should also avoid excess alcohol and other substances that could harm your liver.