

## **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 5–10% of your liver's weight, then you have fatty liver and you may develop more serious complications.

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

A. 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. Most (but not all) fatty liver patients are middle-aged and overweight. 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.

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

A. 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, weakness and confusion.

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

A. 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. During a liver biopsy the radiologist removes a sample of liver tissue with a needle and sends it to a pathologist to look at under a microscope. Liver biopsies are only recommended for patients suspected of having severe fatty liver or to rule out other diseases.

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

A. There are no medical or surgical treatments for fatty liver. If you have fatty liver, and in particular if you have NASH, you should:

- Lose weight
- 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

### **What potential new treatments are being studied?**

A. If you have fatty liver, you should know that 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.