Non-Alcoholic Fatty Liver Disease

Information for patients and families

Read this information to learn:

• what non-alcoholic fatty liver disease is
• what causes it
• how it’s treated
• how to prevent it
• where you can find more information

What is fatty liver disease?

Your liver is your body’s fat factory. It breaks down fat from the food you eat. When the food you eat has more fat than your body needs, your liver stores extra fat. Other parts of your body also store the fat.

A person has fatty liver disease when fat makes up at least 5 to 10% of their liver. If drinking alcohol is not the cause of the disease, it’s called Non-Alcoholic Fatty Liver Disease (NAFLD).

NAFLD can be mild or serious. Serious NAFLD is called Non-Alcoholic Steatohepatitis (NASH).
What is NASH?

NASH is a very serious type of NAFLD. When you have NASH, the extra fat causes your liver to become inflamed. This means there is increased redness and swelling. Over time, inflammation will cause damage to the liver. About 2 to 6 people out of 100 will develop NASH, even if they don’t drink alcohol or drink very little.

About 1 out of 5 adults with NASH can develop severe scarring in their liver (cirrhosis). For about 1 out of 10 people, having NASH may lead to liver failure and death. Some people may need a liver transplant.
What causes NAFLD?
The most common cause of NAFLD in Canada is being obese or extremely overweight. About 3 out of 4 obese people are at risk of developing NAFLD. About 1 out of every 5 obese people is at risk of developing NASH.

People may also have a higher risk of developing NAFLD disease if they:

- have diabetes
- have high amounts of fat in their blood like cholesterol or triglycerides
- have high blood pressure
- had bypass surgery to treat obesity
- lose weight too fast or starve themselves
  (This causes their body to burn muscle for energy, which increases fat in their liver.)

Other less common causes of fatty liver disease include taking certain medicines, alcohol drugs and a family history of fatty liver disease.

Can children get fatty liver disease?
Yes. If a child is obese, they have a higher risk of getting fatty liver disease. Visiting a doctor regularly is important because doctors have found fatty liver disease in children as young as 4 years old.

In Canada, about 1 out of every 10 children is obese. Up to half of these children have a higher risk of getting fatty liver disease.

What are the symptoms?
There are no major symptoms. If your disease becomes severe, you may feel unwell, tired, or have discomfort in your upper abdomen (belly area).
How can I find out if I have fatty liver disease?

A simple blood test may show if your liver is mildly inflamed. An ultrasound of your liver can show a fatty liver or an enlarged (swollen) liver.

The only test that will show for sure that you have a fatty liver is a liver biopsy. During a biopsy, a doctor puts a needle into your liver and takes out tiny samples of liver tissue. The doctor then looks at the samples closely using a microscope.

How is it treated?

If you have fatty liver disease, talk to your doctor about the best way to treat it. If you are overweight, they can talk to you about eating the right foods and exercising to lose the weight slowly and keep it off.

Exercise, eating the right foods and certain medicines can help control high blood pressure, high cholesterol and/or diabetes. This can help treat fatty liver disease. Right now, there are no medicines that just treat fatty liver disease.

How can I prevent it?

Some tips to prevent fatty liver disease include:

☑ Stay at a healthy weight. If you are overweight, try to lose weight, but do it slowly.

☑ Avoid gaining weight at your waist. If your waist measures more than 102 centimeters (40 inches) for men or 88 centimeters (35 inches) for women, you have a higher risk of getting fatty liver disease.

☑ Eat foods that are low in saturated fats and high in fibre.

☑ Exercise at least 4 times a week (or 200 minutes per week).
   Some examples include walking, swimming, gardening and stretching.

☑ Avoid alcohol.
What should I do if I think I have fatty liver?

- Stop drinking alcohol.
- If you need to lose weight, talk with your doctor about how to lose it so you don’t gain it back again.
- Get tested for diabetes, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol.
- Get tested for any other causes of liver disease.

Where can I get more information?

Canadian Liver Foundation