

Nonalcoholic Fatty Liver Disease

Nonalcoholic fatty liver usually refers to two conditions, nonalcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) and nonalcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH). NAFLD is the most common of the two conditions, and in some cases, it can advance to NASH. Both conditions are a result of fat deposits in the liver that are found in people who drink little or no alcohol. Those who drink too much alcohol also may get fatty liver, but it is not defined as NAFLD or NASH.

Cause of NAFLD

The cause of NAFLD is unclear. Experts think that taking in too many calories can cause excess fat to deposit in the liver. Those who tend to develop fatty liver have other diseases related to excess calorie intake, including diabetes and obesity. In many cases, those with fatty liver have elevated blood lipids, such as cholesterol or triglycerides. However, NAFLD and NASH also can occur without any of these problems. Some experts think fatty liver is related to insulin resistance, release of toxins by the fat cells, or oxidative stress.

Symptoms of fatty liver

Fatty liver often is only identified when routine blood tests are run for other problems. For that reason, it is sometimes called a “silent” disease. Sometimes a patient has abdominal discomfort or fatigue, but usually no symptoms.

Dangers of fatty liver

In many cases, fatty liver is not really a problem. But in some people, NAFLD can progress to the more serious NASH, which is scarring of the liver related to fat deposits; this can result in cirrhosis of the liver. It can take many years for scarring or cirrhosis to develop, but when it does, the liver is permanently damaged, which may result in serious consequences. Fluid retention, muscle wasting, intestinal bleeding, and liver failure may occur when a patient has cirrhosis. That is why identifying and monitoring fatty liver is important.

The presence of fatty liver also might help alert your doctor to other medical conditions, such as insulin resistance. If you are identified as having fatty liver, your doctor may suggest physical activity or diet changes to help keep you healthy.

Diet for fatty liver

A low-fat, high-fiber diet and a lifestyle that encourages weight loss or weight maintenance usually is recommended for a person with fatty liver. If you have diabetes, high blood lipids, or are overweight or obese, a healthy diet can help you manage all of these conditions. A registered dietitian can help look at your total health status and decide if dietary changes can help you.

Alcohol intake

Drinking alcohol may not make your condition worse, but it could have a separate effect on the liver, causing scarring and cirrhosis on its own. For that reason, patients with fatty liver should limit or avoid alcohol to keep their liver as healthy as possible.

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