Nonalcoholic Fatty Liver Disease (NAFLD)
What is Nonalcoholic Fatty Liver Disease?

It is normal for the liver to contain some fat. Sometimes, however, too much fat can build up in the liver. When fat makes up more than 10 percent of the liver’s weight, it is called Fatty Liver Disease. If the extra fat is not caused by drinking too much alcohol, the disease is called Nonalcoholic Fatty Liver Disease, or NAFLD.

Do a lot of people have Nonalcoholic Fatty Liver Disease?

Yes, NAFLD affects a lot of people, both adults and children. There are about 100 million Americans who have NAFLD. NAFLD is the most common cause of “chronic” (long-lasting) liver disease in the United States.
What causes Nonalcoholic Fatty Liver Disease?

Many things can cause Nonalcoholic Fatty Liver Disease, including:

- Being overweight (obesity)
- Diabetes, especially Type 2 diabetes
- High cholesterol
- Certain medications

Millions of Americans are at high risk for Nonalcoholic Fatty Liver Disease because they are obese or have diabetes and/or high cholesterol:

- 30 million Americans are obese
- 26 million Americans have diabetes
- 7.9 million Americans have pre-diabetes
- 71 million Americans have high cholesterol

What happens if Nonalcoholic Fatty Liver Disease gets worse?

This buildup of fat in the liver tissue can cause it to become inflamed (swollen). This condition is called NASH, or Nonalcoholic Steatohepatitis. If the damage to the liver continues, cirrhosis (scarring) may develop. Like many liver diseases, NAFLD and NASH are “silent” diseases, meaning that people who have them usually do not feel sick. Even though people feel fine, the liver damage can get worse over time. NAFLD or NASH does not always lead to cirrhosis of the liver, but over 20 years or more, liver disease can silently progress to cirrhosis.
If someone has liver damage for many years, some signs could include feeling very tired or weak, having pain in the abdomen, loss of appetite or weight, jaundice (yellowing of skin and whites of the eyes) or very itchy skin.

How can I find out if I have NAFLD before my liver is damaged?

The best way to find out if you have any liver disease is to talk to your doctor who can do certain tests. If you are overweight, have diabetes or high cholesterol, or a family history of liver disease, you should make an appointment for a physical. The doctor may:

- Check your height and weight to determine your Body Mass Index (BMI), which is a measure of obesity
- Perform blood tests to see if your liver enzymes are higher than normal. The liver enzymes doctors check are called AST and ALT
- Perform tests for diabetes and high cholesterol
- Order medical imaging tests such as ultrasound, CT or MRI
- Perform a liver biopsy

Is there medicine I can take to cure Nonalcoholic Fatty Liver Disease?

Right now, there is no medication people can take to cure NAFLD. The best thing you can do if you have NAFLD is to lose weight. The weight loss should be slow and steady, with a goal of one pound a week. Losing too much weight too fast can actually make
NAFLD worse. Talk to your doctor about setting a weight loss goal that is right for you.

**Preventing Nonalcoholic Fatty Liver Disease**

If you are overweight or obese, or have any other risks for NAFLD but do not yet have NAFLD, there are things you can do to keep your liver healthy.

Make some changes to your eating habits. Use the chart below to help you plan healthier meals. Get some exercise. Talk to your doctor about starting an exercise program at home or at a gym, with a goal of 30 to 60 minutes of exercise a day most days of the week.

**Choose Less**

- Carbohydrates such as regular pasta, white rice, grits, corn, potatoes and bread
- Sugary drinks such as sports drinks and sodas
- Junk food, fast food and fatty food
- Saturated fats such as butter and lard
- Excessive vitamin and mineral supplements

**Choose More**

- Foods such as whole grain pasta, brown rice and bread
- Water, juice and soft drinks with reduced sugar
- Fresh vegetables and fruits, homemade meals and low fat dairy products
- Cooking with unsaturated fat such as olive oil, vegetable oil, canola oil and soybean oil
- Food sources that naturally contain vitamins and minerals

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If you have diabetes or high cholesterol, take your medications as directed to control these diseases.

Avoid alcohol. Alcohol is toxic to liver tissue, so if you already have some liver damage, drinking alcohol can make it worse. Be aware that beer and wine can be just as dangerous to the liver as hard liquor. There is no safe level of drinking when you already have liver damage.