



Non-alcoholic Fatty Liver Disease (NAFLD)

Why is the liver important?

The liver is the second largest organ in your body and is located under your rib cage on the right side. It weighs about three pounds and is shaped like a football that is flat on one side.

The liver performs many jobs in your body. It processes what you eat and drink into energy and nutrients your body can use. The liver also removes harmful substances from your blood.

What is non-alcoholic fatty liver disease?

Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) is the build up of extra fat in liver cells that is not caused by alcohol. It is normal for the liver to contain some fat. However, if more than 5% - 10% percent of the liver's weight is fat, then it is called a fatty liver (steatosis).

Who is likely to have NAFLD?

NAFLD tends to develop in people who are overweight or obese or have diabetes, high cholesterol or high triglycerides. Rapid weight loss and poor eating habits also may lead to NAFLD.

However, some people develop NAFLD even if they do not have any risk factors. NAFLD affects up to 25% of people in the United States.

What are the risks linked to NAFLD?

NAFLD may cause the liver to swell (steatohepatitis). A swollen liver may cause scarring (cirrhosis) over time and may even lead to liver cancer or liver failure.

Non-alcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH)

The more severe form of NAFLD is called non-alcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH). NASH causes the liver to swell and become damaged. NASH tends to develop in people who are overweight or obese, or have diabetes, high cholesterol or high triglycerides. However, some people have NASH even if they do not have any risk factors.

Most people with NASH are between the ages of 40 and 60 years. It is more common in women than in men. NASH often has no symptoms and people can have NASH for years before symptoms occur.

NASH is one of the leading causes of cirrhosis in adults in the United States. Up to 25% of adults with NASH may have cirrhosis.

What are symptoms of NAFLD?

NAFLD often has no symptoms.

When symptoms occur, they may include fatigue, weakness, weight loss, loss of appetite, nausea, abdominal pain, spider-like blood vessels, yellowing of the skin and eyes (jaundice), itching, fluid build up and swelling of the legs (edema) and abdomen (ascites), and mental confusion.

How is NAFLD diagnosed?

NAFLD is initially suspected if blood tests show high levels of liver enzymes. However, other liver diseases are first ruled out through additional tests. Often, an ultrasound is used to confirm the NAFLD diagnosis.

How is NAFLD treated?

There are no medical treatments yet for NAFLD. Eating a healthy diet and exercising regularly may help prevent liver damage from starting or reverse it in the early stages.

- See a doctor who specializes in the liver regularly
- Talk to your doctor about ways to improve your liver health
- Lose weight, if you are overweight or obese
- Lower your cholesterol and triglycerides
- Control your diabetes
- Avoid alcohol

What is the best way to prevent NAFLD?

There are ways to prevent NAFLD:

- Maintain a healthy weight
- Eat a healthy diet
- Exercise regularly
- Limit alcohol intake
- Only take medicines that you need and follow dosing recommendations.