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# Hidden in Plain Sight: Recognizing MASH, a Silent Disease

Advanced liver disease usually doesn't cause symptoms — so it often goes undetected, causing serious damage to the liver. Here's how to spot the signs early so you can protect your health.



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## A Silent Disease Progressed Inside Me — MASH

Susan, who was diagnosed 20 years ago, talks with Jeff about the silent progression of liver disease and his surprising diagnosis during an annual checkup.

referred to as a “silent disease.”

It’s because many people who have MASH experience little to no symptoms of the disease. As a result, they aren’t aware they have it — for years sometimes. This can be dangerous. When unmanaged, MASH can cause [cirrhosis](#), or permanent damage to the liver that can lead to liver failure.<sup>[1]</sup>

“I see a lot of people who might have been told that they had fatty liver decades ago but were told not to worry about it, and now they’re coming in with cirrhosis,” says [Kara Wegermann, MD](#), a gastroenterologist and transplant hepatologist at Duke Health in Durham, North Carolina, and a volunteer for the [American Liver Foundation](#). “[Some] people are not aware of the disease progression.”

If you’ve been [diagnosed with MASH](#), or have risk factors for it, here’s what you can do to protect your liver and overall health.

## **What I Wish I Knew: You Can Have MASH and Feel Fine**

**“ I HAD NO SYMPTOMS. I DIDN’T KNOW THERE WAS ANYTHING WRONG. ... I’VE ALWAYS GONE TO MY PRIMARY**



Having certain health conditions, such as [obesity](#), [type 2 diabetes](#), [high cholesterol](#), or [metabolic syndrome](#), can increase your risk of developing MASH. But unlike, say, screening for high blood pressure, there's no straightforward way to screen for MASH. This is part of the reason people may be living with MASH — or experiencing MASH progression — and not know it.

Staying on top of your regular checkups (especially if you have underlying risk factors) allows your doctor to monitor your overall health and spot signs of liver disease. Often, the first signs of fatty liver disease appear after getting routine blood work or imaging tests that are used to monitor other conditions.<sup>[2]</sup>

"We don't currently have a screening protocol for the general population, so it's sort of up to your primary care doctor to do additional tests if they see elevated liver enzymes," says Dr. Wegermann. If you have other health conditions that increase your risk of MASH, your doctor may decide to monitor your liver health with tests, such as a liver ultrasound or fatty liver index lab values, she adds.

You should also discuss any symptoms you're experiencing, even if they're nonspecific. While MASH is usually thought of as a "silent disease," it can trigger symptoms such as:<sup>[3]</sup>

Pain or achiness in your upper right abdomen

Fatigue or weakness

Loss of appetite

Unexplained weight loss

**“THE DAMAGE THAT WAS DETECTED AT MY INITIAL DIAGNOSIS DIDN’T HAPPEN OVERNIGHT. IT WAS PROBABLY DONE DECADES BEFORE, AND IT WAS GOING TO CONTINUE TO CAUSE DESTRUCTION TO MY LIVER CELLS IF I DIDN’T MAKE CHANGES TO STOP IT. ”**

— Susan Avallone, diagnosed with MASH in 2003



MASH is a progressive disease, but one that tends to advance slowly. Moreover, not everyone's condition progresses in quite the same way. "Some people have fat in their liver and never seem to get inflammation, scarring, or fibrosis," says Wegermann. "Other people have a lot of inflammation and progress more quickly."

To keep MASH from developing or progressing, doctors recommend following a healthy lifestyle that includes:<sup>[4]</sup>

Eating a healthy diet

Exercising regularly

Losing weight if needed

Quitting smoking

It's also important to treat any other health conditions you have. Managing blood sugar, weight, and **blood pressure** are also all really important for long-term health," says Wegermann.

## What Your Doctor Wants You to Know: Routine Checkups Are Essential for Diagnosing MASH

The most important thing you can do to protect your liver health is schedule regular checkups with your primary care provider. "If your primary care doctor is checking routine blood work, they'll have a chance to see if [there are abnormalities] in the liver and if there's any further testing that needs to be done," says Wegermann.

If MASH is detected early enough, you may also be a candidate for further treatment, which can help prevent the progression of the disease and future problems with the liver, says Wegermann. "You have an opportunity to intervene and stay healthy longer," she says.

