

URI associate professor receives national grant to study liver disease

By **James Bessette** - 12/17/2024



NISANNE GHONEM, a University of Rhode Island College of Pharmacy associate professor, received a \$50,000 American Liver Foundation award to help advance her research into primary sclerosing cholangitis, a rare liver disease that can lead to cirrhosis, liver failure and death. / COURTESY UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND

SOUTH KINGSTOWN – University of Rhode Island College of Pharmacy associate professor Nisanne Ghonem has received a \$50,000 American Live Foundation award to help advance her research into primary sclerosing cholangitis, a rare liver disease that can lead to cirrhosis, liver failure and death.

PSC causes bile ducts inside and outside the liver to become inflamed, scarred and eventually narrowed or blocked, URI says. From there, bile build up in the liver and causes further damage, leading to pain in the abdomen, itchy skin, diarrhea and jaundice, potentially leading to cirrhosis.

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Ghonem and her team are conducting a study to measure the presence of mutations in uridine-diphosphate-glucuronosyltransferases, or UGT genes, which are involved in the elimination of harmful bile acid molecules and metabolizing medications. The team will test effects of drugs called peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor activators, or PPARs, on UGTs, mutations that may dampen the effectiveness of the drugs in treating PSC.

Ghonem said in a statement that her team's earlier research found that patients with PSC who were treated with fenofibrate have improved UGT processing of bile acids. She also said her team found that fenofibrate can reduce the inflammatory response of immune cells to bile acids.

"However, to date, no studies have directly compared the newer candidate PPAR drugs to understand which medication performs best," Ghonem said, "and the role of the UGT gene mutations in influencing the treatment response to these drugs in PSC is unknown."

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