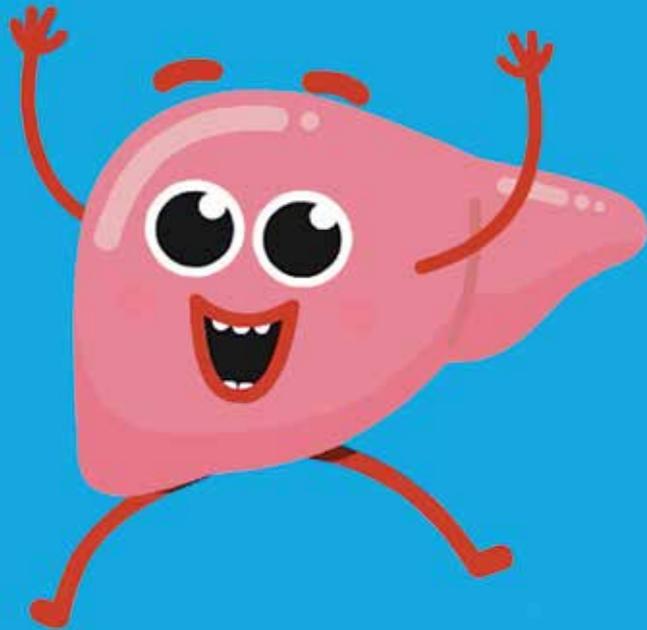


Fatty Liver Disease

We can break free!



LiverWELL®

Why your liver is important

Just about everything you eat and drink goes through your liver. Even chemicals that touch your skin and toxins that you inhale, pass through your liver.

Your liver has around 500 different tasks to perform to help keep your body working at its best. Its two most important roles are cleaning your blood and aiding digestion by breaking down fat and sugar for your body to use as energy. A healthy liver also helps fight infection and remove harmful toxins from the body. A damaged liver cannot carry out these jobs properly so it is important to keep your liver healthy.



Facts about the liver:

- It is the largest internal organ.
- It is located on the right-hand side of your body, behind your ribs.
- It can repair itself and create new, healthy liver tissue.
- It breaks down and absorbs fats in the body.
- There are 1.5 litres of blood flowing through your liver every minute.

What is Fatty Liver Disease?

Fatty Liver Disease

A condition caused by a build-up of fats (triglycerides) in liver cells that can gradually damage the organ and lead to serious complications.

While it is normal for a healthy liver to contain some fat, if it accounts for more than 10 per cent of the liver's weight then you have Fatty Liver, or steatosis. Don't worry, many of us have it and you are not alone.

As there are no obvious symptoms or pain associated with Fatty Liver, it often goes undetected and undiagnosed for many years. It may not cause any damage to your liver at all but for some people, ongoing inflammation caused by fat in the liver may lead to serious complications. The good news is, if Fatty Liver is diagnosed by your doctor early, it can be reversed.

What causes Fatty Liver Disease?

It is unclear how your liver becomes fatty. The fat may come from other parts of your body, your liver may absorb an increased amount of fat from your intestine, or the liver loses its ability to change fat into a form that can be eliminated. Simply eating fatty foods, by itself, does not produce a fatty liver. While many people are aware of Alcohol-related Fatty Liver Disease (ALD) caused by drinking too much alcohol, the most common form of Fatty Liver Disease found in Australian adults is Non-Alcoholic Fatty Liver Disease (NAFLD), an umbrella term that covers the simple accumulation of fat in the liver cells which sometimes progresses to swelling, fibrosis and cirrhosis.

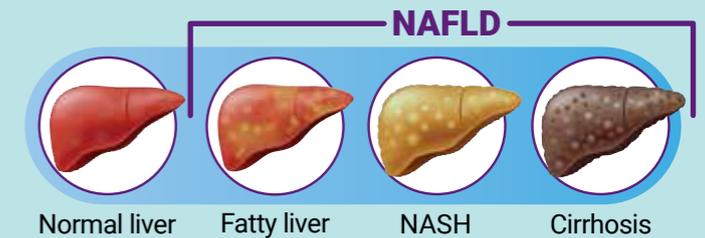
Fatty Liver Disease is also associated with a range of health issues including obesity, high cholesterol levels and Type 2 diabetes. Less common causes include underactive thyroid, certain drugs,

polycystic ovary syndrome (POS) and complications late in pregnancy which usually contribute to acute Fatty Liver Disease rather than one that has evolved over many months (chronic). While Fatty Liver Disease typically occurs in people who are overweight, it is important to remember that it can affect any one of us, no matter our shape or size.

A diet high in carbohydrates, sugar, fat and processed foods can increase the risk of Fatty Liver Disease. The Australian Bureau of Statistics Health Survey (2014-15)* estimates that more than one quarter of Australian adults are obese, with around 60 per cent having been diagnosed with NAFLD. This can be reversed by working on a safe and healthy lifestyle plan (see Treatment).

The stages of NAFLD

NAFLD, the most common form of Fatty Liver Disease, may unfold over many years, with no harm to your health. Without symptoms or pain, we often don't even realise we have it. The danger is that left unchecked, there is a possibility that over time the liver may become inflamed (any inflammation of the liver is called hepatitis). This condition, called Non-Alcoholic Steatohepatitis (NASH), may cause swelling of the liver and you may suffer symptoms such as fatigue, loss of appetite, sudden and unexpected weight-loss, abdominal discomfort, jaundice (yellowing of skin and whites of the eyes), very itchy skin, weakness and confusion. Ongoing inflammation leads to a build-up of scar tissue in your liver, known as fibrosis, which can lead to cirrhosis. By identifying NASH early, your doctor will have a good chance of preventing or reversing any scarring (fibrosis).



Am I at risk?

If Fatty Liver Disease is left untreated, you are at risk of developing hepatitis (liver inflammation) and other serious complications. But the good news is that a simple blood test can usually identify whether you have it or not.

Fatty Liver Disease can affect anyone, but typically occurs in people who are overweight and diabetic, with high cholesterol levels. The average age of those with NAFLD is around 50, with more cases found among men than women, although it can also be found in children.* It is important to test liver function in children and adolescents because insulin resistance and metabolic dysfunction begin in childhood. While research is advancing rapidly, there are currently no specific drug treatments for NAFLD or NASH, but early detection and lifestyle changes, can help immensely.

*Data source: Mahady, S and Adams, L. 2018, 'Burden of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease in Australia', *Journal of Gastroenterology and Hepatology*, vol. 33, no.1, p. 4.

Talking about your concerns

Talk about any concerns with your doctor. If you need treatment, they will recommend appropriate actions and monitor your progress. In the early stages of Fatty Liver Disease, Medicare covers the cost of testing so ensure you take the first step to find out how your liver is functioning. Your doctor can also refer you to liver specialists. An up-to-date directory on liver clinics and liver specialists is listed on the Hepatitis Victoria website.

Talk to friends and family for practical and emotional support and discuss any concerns with health providers – including nurses, counsellors, therapists, pharmacists, hepatologists, gastroenterologists, dieticians and nutritionists. For general information and support, you can also call the Hepatitis Victoria Infoline on 1800 703 003.

Stages of liver disease

There are more than 100 liver diseases affecting men, women and children. No matter the type, damage to your liver progresses in a similar way. The good news is that if liver disease is identified early, treatment can be very effective. If left untreated, your liver will worsen.



Fatty Liver:

An accumulation of fat in the liver cells can occur over many years, without obvious symptoms or pain. Regular blood tests can identify Fatty Liver Disease early and be reversed.



Inflammation:

An inflamed (swollen) liver is caused by viral infection, too much alcohol, problems with your immune system or toxins. It can also be the result of an undetected/undiagnosed Fatty Liver Disease such as NAFLD which progresses to the inflammation stage (NASH). Treatment can help the inflammation go away.



Fibrosis:

If an inflamed liver is not treated, healthy soft tissue will begin to scar and harden. With treatment, fibrosis (scarring) can heal.



Cirrhosis:

A liver with cirrhosis is full of hard scarred tissue. Treatment can stop the condition from getting worse, protect any healthy tissue, and sometimes even improve liver function.



Liver Cancer:

Risk of liver cancer is higher if you have an existing liver disease such as cirrhosis. Cancer can be managed if found early.



Liver Failure:

Liver failure is when the liver stops functioning. This is a very serious condition that needs urgent medical care. A liver transplant might be an option.

Treatment for Fatty Liver Disease

There are no specific drug or surgical treatments for Fatty Liver Disease such as NAFLD (Non-Alcoholic Fatty Liver Disease) and NASH (Non-Alcoholic Steatohepatitis). However, changes to lifestyle can help prevent and reverse some of the damage.

- If you are overweight, start a weight management program that aims to lose around half to one kilogram per week.
- Increase your physical activity with aerobic and resistance exercise at least five days a week. This could be a brisk half-hour walk and low impact weight training.
- We should all aim to eat a balanced, healthy diet that is low in fat, sugar and calories and high in fibre. Reducing the size of food portions/serves can also help. Your doctor or dietician can devise a well-balanced, nutritious healthy eating plan just for you.
- Lower your triglycerides (fat in the blood) through a balanced diet, and/or medication prescribed by your doctor.
- Look after your diabetes if you have it.
- Avoid/reduce alcohol intake as it is toxic to liver tissue.
- Try not to smoke.
- Only take drugs your doctor has prescribed for you.
- Get regular check-ups from a doctor who specialises in liver care.

By making these changes and sticking to them, you should be able to lead a healthy life, even with Fatty Liver Disease.

Keeping your liver healthy

Most of us with Fatty Liver Disease can improve our health through simple and sustained lifestyle measures such as a low-fat, low-sugar, low-calorie diet, smaller food portions and increased exercise.

The free LiverWELL app developed by Hepatitis Victoria has lots of tips on how to keep your liver healthy:



eating well: cut back on foods that are high in fat and sugar



getting active: try some exercise everyday



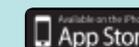
feeling well: take care of yourself emotionally, spiritually and physically



drink aware: cut down on the alcohol you drink or try to stop altogether.

For information and practical tips on managing your liver health, visit: www.liverwell.org.au or download the **LiverWELL app**

LiverWELL®



Finding support

Websites

www.liverwell.org.au

www.loveyourliver.com.au

www.quit.org.au

www.hepvic.org.au

www.cancervic.org.au

www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

HEPATITIS VICTORIA

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Produced by Hepatitis Victoria. This information is general in nature and not intended as medical advice. Consult your doctor for further information.