

ADVERTISING FEATURE

GETTING BACK INTO SHAPE

How to look after your 'superhero' liver

Health advocates are working to raise awareness on how to avoid liver disease.

We joke about our liver. We joke about fearing it won't survive the food and drink excesses of Christmas, or a festive weekend, but apart from keeping an eye on our alcohol intake, we tend not to pay too much attention to this vital organ.

Russell Shewan, CEO of LiverWELL, an organisation that champions the interests of people affected by liver disease, says there is an urgent need to build awareness and understanding about the relationship between our livers and our lifestyles.

Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) affects about 5 million children and adults in Australia and this figure is projected to increase to 7 million by 2030. Nearly half of people over the age of 60 are affected.

NAFLD is the build-up of excess fat in the liver cells. If fat accounts for more than 10 per cent of your liver's weight, then you have fatty liver and this can lead to the development of serious illness such as cirrhosis, liver cancer and liver failure.

NAFLD is becoming common in Western countries mainly because our diets include excessive added sugars and fats.

"The liver is a superhero performing more than 500 functions," says Shewan.

"It processes almost everything we eat and drink. As well as the critically important jobs of cleaning our blood and helping with digestion, the liver filters out the good from the bad the way a marsh does in the



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Russell Shewan

environment - ridding the body of toxins and harmful substances and retaining what is beneficial.

"Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease is the canary in the coal mine," he says. "It can be an early indicator of diseases to follow."

Liver deterioration may be reversed if diagnosed early as the liver has the astonishing ability to regenerate after damage. "The early stage is a great time to make minor lifestyle tweaks that can go a long way to restoring the health of your liver," Shewan says.

There are no drug treatments for NAFLD.

Preventive and restorative measures largely focus on moderation and healthy lifestyle principles.

"Healthy eating and drinking, exercise, good mental health and a Mediterranean-style diet with a lot of fish and vegetables all help. Coffee is good for your liver. So is chocolate - in moderation. Drink plenty of water and get plenty of rest," Shewan says.

Although there are no symptoms in the early stages, NAFLD is more common in people with high blood pressure, high cholesterol or who have type 2 diabetes. "If you are overweight, particularly around the

middle, there's a good chance that you have it, but even quite skinny people can have this visceral fat inside," he says.

Signs that liver damage may have progressed beyond the early stages include skin and eyes that appear yellowish (jaundice), abdominal pain and swelling, swelling in the legs and ankles, itchy skin and dark urine.

Your GP can diagnose fatty liver via a blood test and this may be followed by a scan or ultrasound.

World Liver Day is April 19, providing an opportunity to raise awareness of liver health.

When it comes to getting back into shape, eating well, being drink aware, feeling well and being active are the keys to keeping ourselves and our livers healthy, and looking after ourselves when our livers are not so healthy.

Visit the LiverWELL website: www.liverwell.org.au

Call LiverLine for info on liver health and hepatitis: 1800 703 003

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