

Fatty Liver

Fatty liver is a condition where fat tissue builds up in the liver cells. It can be harmless until inflammation occurs, and develops into a condition called steatohepatitis.



The liver

The liver is the second largest organ in our body and is located on the upper right side of the abdomen. The liver processes fats and proteins from digested food and makes bile to digest fats in the gut. It helps to store glucose in a form of glycogen. It also helps to detoxify, process, and remove harmful substances (such as alcohol, poisons, and toxins) from our body.

Causes

In normal circumstances, excess fat is passed out of liver cells and stored in fat cells throughout the body. In fatty liver, the normal processing of fat is disrupted, causing excessive fat to build up in the liver cells. There are two common types of fatty liver conditions: hepatic steatosis (or simple fatty liver) and steatohepatitis.

Diagnosis

Fatty liver is usually diagnosed by blood tests, or through imaging such as ultrasound, fibroscan, CT scan or MRI. Some people need a liver biopsy to investigate the extent of fat accumulation, inflammation and scarring. Various blood tests may also be needed to rule out other liver disorders such as viral hepatitis or autoimmune hepatitis.

Types and treatments

Hepatic Steatosis

It is defined as the fat content inside liver cells makes up more than 5% to 10% of the liver's weight. It is a common condition and is not associated with serious damage or harm to the liver. It usually does not have symptom and is commonly seen in people with excessive calorie and alcohol intake, obesity, and diabetes.

The condition can be reversed by stopping alcohol intake, losing weight or managing diabetes.

Steatohepatitis

Steatohepatitis is when the liver cells have excessive fat and is associated with liver inflammation. This is a less common but potentially more dangerous condition as it can lead to cirrhosis (scarring of liver), increasing the risk of liver toxicity. Steatohepatitis is further classified as **alcoholic steatohepatitis** and **non-alcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH)**. The former is caused by drinking too much alcohol and can only be contained when drinking stops; the latter is not caused by alcohol and has almost no symptom. Sometimes, it appears to be a complication arising from obesity, diabetes or hyperlipidaemia (high triglycerides or cholesterol).

There is no available treatment proven to stop the inflammation but the ways to minimise the risk of developing cirrhosis are weight loss (if obese), a low fat diet, controlling blood sugars (if diabetic) and to stop drinking alcohol completely.

For more details about fatty liver, please consult your doctor.

In Hong Kong, the prevalence of the non-alcoholic fatty liver disease is 27% in 2015. A study published in 2020 revealed that the prevalence of NASH cases may increase by 20-35% during 2019-2030. Preventing the growth of diabetes and obese population will be a key factor in reducing ongoing increase in non-alcoholic fatty liver disease.

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References:

UpToDate health information source

Department of Health, HK

The University of Hong Kong

Study on Modelling NAFLD disease burden in four Asian regions 2019-2030

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脂肪肝

脂肪肝是指肝細胞積聚過多脂肪，一般而言，脂肪肝對健康無礙，惟出現發炎的情況時，可變成脂肪肝炎。



肝臟

肝臟是身體的第二大器官，位於腹部的右上方。經消化後食物中的脂肪和蛋白質，會由肝臟處理，肝臟會製造膽汁於腸道代謝脂肪，並以肝糖的形式儲存葡萄糖，幫助身體排毒、處理和除去體內的有害物質，如酒精、有毒物質和毒素。

成因

在正常情況下，多餘的脂肪會被全身的脂肪細胞排走。若體內處理脂肪的過程受到干擾，便會導致過多脂肪於肝細胞積聚，造成脂肪肝。兩種常見脂肪肝類型為單純性脂肪肝和脂肪肝炎。

診斷

脂肪肝通常經驗血或影像檢查診斷，包括超聲波、肝纖維化掃描、電腦掃描或磁力共振。如有必要，可透過肝活檢以檢視脂肪積聚、發炎和結疤的程度。另外也可能抽血進一步檢查，以排除其他肝臟疾病的可能，如病毒性肝炎或自體免疫性肝炎等。

類別及治療

單純性脂肪肝（肝脂肪變性）

當肝細胞內的脂肪含量超過肝重量的百分之五至十，便診斷為單純性脂肪肝。單純性脂肪肝很常見，不會嚴重損害肝臟，通常沒有任何徵狀，常見於過度攝取卡路里、酒精、肥胖和糖尿病的人士身上。

單純性脂肪肝患者亦可透過戒酒、減肥或控制血糖（如患糖尿病）來控制情況。

脂肪肝炎

當肝細胞積聚過多脂肪及出現相關的肝炎，便造成脂肪肝炎。這類肝炎並不常見，但對健康構成嚴重狀況的潛在風險較高，有可能惡化為肝硬化（肝臟結疤），增加肝臟中毒的風險。脂肪肝炎分為兩類：**酒精性脂肪肝炎**及**非酒精性脂肪肝炎**。前者是由過量飲酒引起，可透過戒酒而改善病情。後者和酒精沒有關係，但可能由肥胖、糖尿病或高血脂症（高三酸甘油或膽固醇）引起。

現時沒有有效阻止發炎的治療方案，但體重控制（如肥胖）、低脂飲食、控制血糖（如患糖尿病）和戒酒均可減低惡化成為肝硬化的風險。

如欲了解有關脂肪肝的更多資訊，請徵詢醫生的意見。

2015年，非酒精性脂肪肝炎約佔二成七。2020年刊登的一項研究顯示，非酒精性脂肪肝炎於2019至2030年，將持續上升二成至三成五。要減少非酒精性脂肪肝疾病持續上升，預防更多人患上糖尿病和肥胖是重要的關鍵。

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參考資料：

UpToDate 網站

衛生署

香港大學

Study on Modelling NAFLD disease burden in four Asian regions 2019-2030

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