

# Health Tips

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## Health Tip: What is fatty liver?

Judging from the number of questions pertaining to fatty liver that have come to eDocAmerica recently, there appears to be a high level of interest regarding this condition. Generally speaking, fatty liver develops when the liver does not process and break down fats as it normally should.

Most people are aware that drinking alcohol can damage the liver, and in fact, one type of fatty liver disease is related to alcohol consumption. Increasingly, however, a type of fatty liver disease, known as non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD), is being diagnosed. The mildest form of NAFLD is called simple fatty liver (steatosis).

In a small percentage of those with NAFLD the fat causes inflammation in the liver, a condition known as nonalcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH). This is a considerably more serious condition than fatty liver, and can ultimately lead to cirrhosis (irreversible scarring of the liver) and liver failure.



**Who gets Fatty Liver?** If it seems like the prevalence of fatty liver has increased in recent years, there may be a good explanation. NAFLD is particularly common among the overweight (body mass index of 25-30) and the obese (body mass index above 30). Alarmingly, the number of individuals constituting these two groups has doubled in this country over the past 10 years.

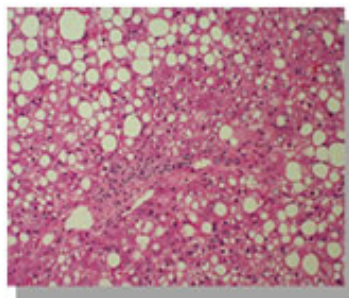
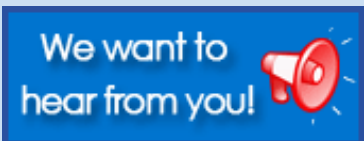
Furthermore, the risk of developing NAFLD goes up along with other illnesses that are on the rise, such as Type 2 diabetes, high cholesterol, and high triglycerides. It has been estimated that up to 30 percent of Americans have simple fatty liver with NASH affecting up to 5 percent.

**What are the symptoms of fatty liver?** People with simple fatty liver have no symptoms, an issue that may inhibit its diagnosis or treatment. Fatty liver is most often discovered when liver function tests are ordered for other reasons or during a "screening" evaluation if fatty liver is suspected. Should fatty liver progress to NASH or to cirrhosis, a progression that can take years to occur, symptoms such as fatigue, weight loss, and abdominal discomfort may develop. In its terminal stages, those with cirrhosis may develop jaundice, fluid retention, muscle wasting, bleeding from the intestines, and liver failure.

**How do you tell fatty liver from NASH?**



any other topic or question you have!



When liver functions are found to be elevated, a search for the underlying cause is initiated. This evaluation includes checking for medications that could elevate liver functions, asking about previous episodes of hepatitis, and assessing the level of alcohol use. Often an ultrasound or CT scan of the liver is performed also to look for tumors or evidence of fatty liver. An ultrasound or CT scan that demonstrates fat deposits within the liver,

particularly in obese individuals, strongly suggests the diagnosis of NAFLD. The next step is to differentiate benign fatty liver disease from NASH. The best way of doing this is with a liver biopsy. When liver tissue obtained from biopsy is examined under a microscope, fatty liver will show fat without inflammation, whereas with NASH, inflammation and damage to liver cells will be apparent.

**How is NAFLD treated?** Although having fat deposits in the liver is not normal, simple fatty liver does not affect one's quality of life or life expectancy. Treatment is recommended, however, to address the underlying causes of the condition. Measures that can control and in some cases reverse fatty liver are:

- Losing weight
- Discontinuing medications that may be affecting liver function
- Improving control of diabetes
- Increasing physical activity
- Avoiding alcohol consumption
- Eating a balanced, healthy diet
- Reducing blood lipids (e.g. cholesterol, triglycerides)

Weight loss is perhaps the most important step that someone with NAFLD can take to reduce the accumulation of fat within the liver. Weight loss can even improve liver function tests in someone with NASH. For those with diabetes, tight control of blood glucose levels may be beneficial. Treatment with a medication called ursodeoxycholic acid has shown promising results in preliminary studies, however, this treatment is still under investigation. Should NASH progress to liver failure, liver transplantation is the only available treatment.

**Can NAFLD be prevented?** Fatty liver, like high cholesterol or diabetes, develops to a large degree because of one's lifestyle habits. The most effective ways of reducing your risk is to maintain a healthy weight, eat a low fat, low cholesterol diet, and get regular exercise. Since fatty liver can also develop from excessive alcohol consumption, alcohol consumption should be moderated.

If you or someone in your family would like to know more about NAFLD and how it can be prevented, then click on the 'Ask eDoc' icon, to the right, login, and send us your questions.



We would love the opportunity to assist you.

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