



facts about...

# FATTY LIVER DISEASE

## FATTY LIVER DISEASE

### What is fatty liver disease?

“Fatty Liver Disease” describes a range of conditions caused by an accumulation of fat in the liver. The disease affects about 10% of Australians and is the most common reason for mildly abnormal results on liver function testing.

Fatty Liver occurs when fat in the liver cells represents more than 10% of the liver’s weight.

It does not cause pain, nausea or fatty food intolerance, but does sometimes indicate other health problems.

#### SOME CONDITIONS

are associated with resistance to insulin, a hormone the body produces to maintain normal amounts of sugar in the blood.

### What causes Fatty Liver?

Fatty liver is not caused by eating fatty foods.

#### **The most common causes are:**

- Obesity (about 20% of people considered obese have fatty liver disease)
- Diabetes mellitus (particularly the type that does not require insulin injections)
- Heavy alcohol use

#### **Less common causes:**

- Under active thyroid
- Certain drugs
- High blood cholesterol and triglycerides
- Polycystic ovary syndrome
- Complications late in pregnancy
- Intestinal bypass surgery for obesity.

Some of these conditions are associated with resistance to insulin, a hormone the body produces to maintain normal amounts of sugar in the blood. If you are insulin-resistant, your body is not as sensitive as it should be to the effect of insulin, and so blood sugar levels can exceed the normal range.

By losing weight and increasing physical activity, you can reduce insulin resistance.

### What is NAFLD (Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease)?

NAFLD (often referred to simply as “Fatty Liver”) is the most common kind of fatty liver disease. It does not result in liver damage and so does not require treatment.

### What is NASH (Non-alcoholic steatohepatitis)?

NASH is a chronic disease in which accumulated fat in liver cells causes liver inflammation. The condition very slowly gets worse and is more likely to be a problem if you also have another disease, such as hepatitis C or B or if you drink too much alcohol. Rarely, NASH gradually progresses to a more serious chronic liver disease, such as cirrhosis.

NASH typically occurs in people who are middle-aged, overweight and diabetic, with high blood cholesterol and triglyceride levels.

### How is Fatty Liver diagnosed?

Because fatty liver disease does not cause pain, nausea or fatty food intolerance, many people don’t realise they have it until a routine blood test suggests a liver problem. If this happens to you, your doctor may organise an ultrasound or CT scan of the liver to check for fat. If NASH is suspected, a liver biopsy may be suggested, so that liver cells can be examined under a microscope, but this is rarely necessary.

### What should you do if you have NAFLD or NASH?

There is no specific treatment for either NAFLD or NASH, but a number of lifestyle changes can help.



Make the required changes. Maintain them through a strict dietary and exercise program. Have regular check-ups with your doctor. In that way, you can expect to lead a normal life, even with fatty liver disease.

#### **In summary**

Fatty Liver (especially NAFLD) is common in Australia, but most people with the disease can improve their health through simple measures such as better diet and increased exercise.

To find out more about changes you can make to help your liver, or if you have questions or concerns, see your doctor.

- If you are overweight, begin a weight management program that aims at gradual loss of around 0.25 to 0.5kg per week. You may need to lose 5% to 10% of body weight.
- Exercise daily. You might try taking a half hour walk.
- Do Not take any drugs your doctor has not prescribed for you.
- Take at the recommended intervals any drugs your doctor prescribes for high blood sugar (insulin resistance) or high cholesterol/triglycerides
- Avoid alcohol
- Eat a healthy diet. Contrary to popular opinion, no particular diet is liver cleansing, but a healthy one greatly aids wellbeing. Your doctor or dietitian can provide you with a well-designed, healthy and nutritious plan.

*This information booklet has been designed by the Digestive Health Foundation as an aid to people who have fatty liver disease or for those who wish to know more about it. This is not meant to replace personal advice from your medical practitioner.*

*The Digestive Health Foundation (DHF) is an educational body committed to promoting better health for all Australians by promoting education and community health programs related to the digestive system.*

*The DHF is the educational arm of the Gastroenterological Society of Australia, the professional body representing the Specialty of gastrointestinal and liver disease in Australia. Members of the Society are drawn from physicians, surgeons, scientists and other medical specialties with an interest in GI disorders.*

*Since its establishment in 1990 the DHF has been involved in the development of programs to improve community awareness and the understanding of digestive diseases.*

*Research and education into gastrointestinal disease are essential to contain the effects of these disorders on all Australians.*

*Further information on a wide variety of gastrointestinal conditions is available on our website.*