

Non Alcoholic Fatty Liver Disease (NAFLD)

Non alcoholic fatty liver

One of the liver's functions is to process fats and proteins from the food that we eat. It is normal for the liver cells to have some fat in them and any excess fat is normally passed out of the liver and stored in fat cells. In fatty liver excess fat remains in the liver cells (hepatocytes) and if more than 5 -10% of the liver's weight is due to fat then this causes fatty liver. This does not usually give rise to any problems. However very rarely inflammation and scar tissue develop and this can lead to cirrhosis

CAUSES

When the liver does not properly process the fat taken in during eating then too much fat accumulates in the liver. Excess calorie intake may cause this, and people are more at risk if they have certain other conditions such as obesity, diabetes, high levels of lipids (hyperlipidaemia) and hypertension. In general most people who suffer from fatty liver are middle aged and overweight. Other factors that may lead to a fatty liver are excess alcohol intake, rapid weight loss and malnutrition. But it should be remembered that some people with fatty liver will have none of these conditions.

Fatty Liver / Steatohepatitis (NASH)

In most cases fatty liver will cause no serious damage to the liver, this is sometimes called Simple fatty liver or hepatic steatosis (it is thought that up to 1 in 4 Americans have this type of fatty liver.) However when the excess fat is associated with inflammation in the liver it is referred to as **Steatohepatitis** (steato means fat and hepatitis means inflammation in the liver.) Any inflammation of the liver over a period of time can cause scarring (or fibrosis) of the liver which may lead to cirrhosis. If this inflammation is caused by excess alcohol intake then it is referred to as alcoholic steatohepatitis, if it is not linked to alcohol then it is called **non-alcoholic steatohepatitis** or **NASH**.

Symptoms and diagnosis

Most often people with fatty liver have no symptoms and their doctor may discover an enlarged liver when they are having routine check ups or investigations or liver blood tests are found to be abnormal. If your doctor suspects that you have a fatty liver they may organise other blood tests and an ultrasound to rule out any other condition that could be causing the inflammation in the liver. The most common way to get an accurate diagnosis of NASH is to undergo a liver biopsy where the doctor will take a small sample of liver tissue to be analysed. This will also tell the doctor the degree of any damage done to the liver.

Treatment

At present there is no medical treatment available for fatty liver, but there are a number of ways in which you can help prevent further damage:

- Weight loss
- Treatment for lowering lipids (diet or medication)
- Reducing or avoiding alcohol
- If diabetic ensuring good control of blood glucose
- Increase physical activity
- Controlling blood pressure (weight loss or medication)
- Healthy diet
- Regular monitoring by a liver specialist (especially important in NASH)

If you have any questions regarding fatty liver then contact the Liver Unit at the Wellington Hospital on 0207 586 7156, or via e-mail at David.Morrison@HCAHealthcare.co.uk