

Fatty Liver Disease: Why It can Develop in People Who Are Not Overweight

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Fatty liver disease is commonly associated with obesity, but excess body weight is not a prerequisite for developing the condition. Many individuals with a normal BMI have significant fat accumulation in the liver, a condition increasingly recognized as lean metabolic dysfunction-associated steatotic liver disease (MASLD). Understanding the underlying causes is important because fatty liver disease can progress silently, even in individuals who appear metabolically healthy.

So, what are some contributing factors?

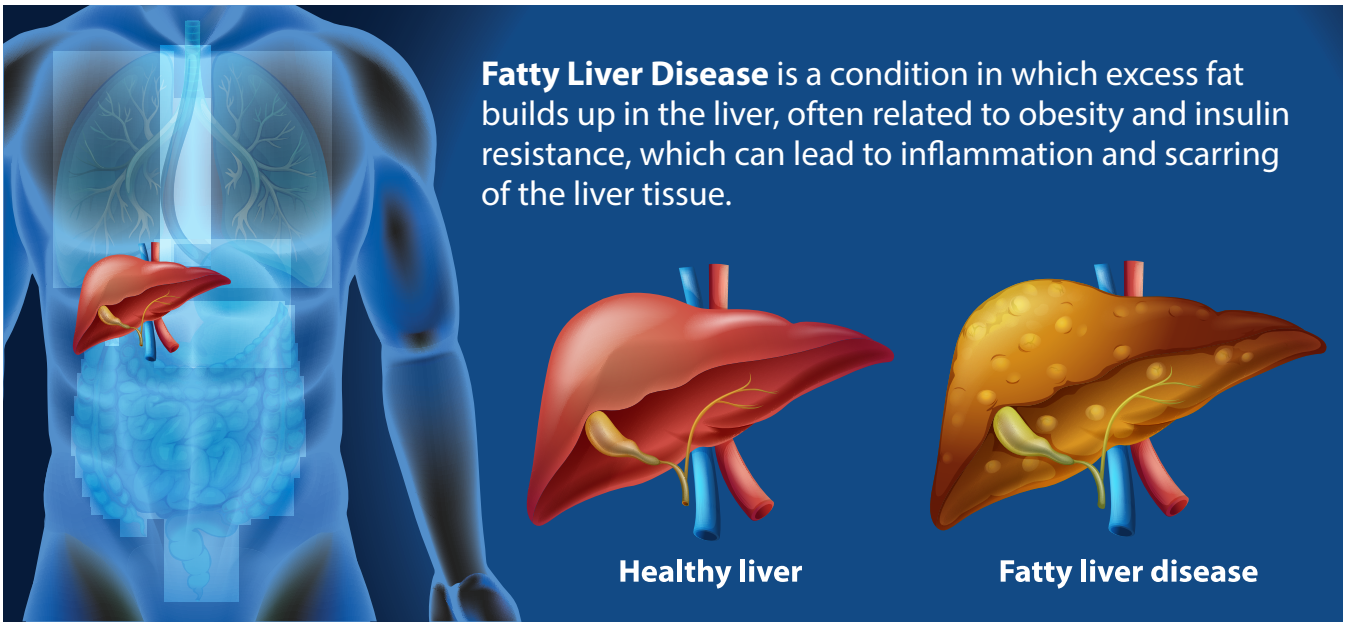
• Insulin resistance (IR). IR can increase the delivery of fatty acids to the liver and stimulate excess fat production. This can occur in people with low muscle mass or increased visceral fat.

• Dietary patterns. Diets high in refined carbohydrates, added sugars, fructose-sweetened beverages and ultra-processed foods can promote hepatic fat accumulation. In particular, excess fructose intake can increase liver fat production.

• Genetics. Certain genetic variations (PNPLA3, TM6SF2) increase susceptibility to fatty liver disease, even in lean individuals.

• Visceral fat. A person can have a normal weight but carry excess fat around their abdominal organs. The metabolically active fat contributes to inflammation, insulin resistance and increased fat delivery to the liver. In my office we use InBody body composition analysis to measure visceral fat levels.

• Other contributing factors. Sedentary behavior, certain medications, hormonal changes, sleep disturbances and excessive alcohol consumption can also contribute to liver fat accumulation.



So, what can we do? The good news is that fatty liver disease is often reversible, especially when identified early. Treatment always focuses on improving metabolic health rather than just reducing body weight.

- Prioritize protein and fiber to support muscle mass and metabolic function.
- Reduce added sugars and refined carbohydrates.
- Adopt a Mediterranean-style diet. Olive oil, fatty fish, vegetables, berries, nuts, legumes and minimally processed foods.
- Build muscle and increase physical activity.
- Prioritize protein and fiber to support muscle mass and metabolic function.
- Address metabolic risk factors. Monitor fasting glucose and insulin, hemoglobin A1c, triglycerides, cholesterol and blood pressure.
- Limit alcohol. Especially in persons who already have fatty liver disease.

The bottom line is that fatty liver disease is not exclusively a weight-related condition. It is often a reflection of underlying metabolic dysfunction that can occur in any body size. Early identification is important because untreated disease can progress to inflammation, fibrosis or even cirrhosis.

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