

# Are you living with a fatty liver?

Find out if you're at risk of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease – and how to reduce any damage

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**N**on-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) is one of the most common forms of liver disease in the UK – and its primary cause is being overweight.

'When you gain fat, it doesn't just show on the outside – it can also collect around internal organs, including your liver,' says Slimming World nutritionist Jenny Barber. 'These fat cells then secrete acids that can damage surrounding cells, and eventually lead to inflammation and scarring, which damage your liver's health.'

NAFLD also increases the risk of developing cardiovascular disease, as well as the likelihood of complications from some other conditions. 'For example, if you have two patients with Type 2 diabetes who both control their condition to the same extent, the person with fat in their liver will have a higher risk of heart attack and stroke,' says Philip Newsome, Professor of Hepatology at the University of Birmingham.

NAFLD is estimated to affect one in four people in the UK. Men and women are equally likely to develop the disease, and you're most at risk between the ages of 40 and 60. On the plus side, though – and it's a big plus! – being diagnosed doesn't mean you'll inevitably suffer from long-term effects. If you take steps to tackle it, fat in the liver can be greatly reduced, along with any >

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# 500

**The approximate number of tasks the liver has in the body, including storing fuel for energy, removing toxins, and processing fats and proteins**

of the associated risks. Here's everything you need to know...

## Every pound you lose counts

Each time you see a drop on the scales, you're lowering your risk of NAFLD – another reason to celebrate all those little milestones! 'With this condition, it's not about reaching a set weight or Body Mass Index,' says Philip Newsome. 'If you lose five to 10 per cent of your body weight, you dramatically reduce your risk of the damaging inflammation associated with fat build-up.' Get past your Club 10 award, though, and the benefits are even greater. 'When you lose more than 10 per cent of your body weight, you can also start to reverse any scarring that might have already occurred,' adds Philip.

## It's still best to limit the booze

While NAFLD only accounts for eight per cent of deaths from liver disease (compared with 80 per cent triggered by alcohol consumption), there is some evidence to suggest that alcohol is more likely to harm your liver if you're overweight, says Professor Nick Sheron from the University of Southampton. 'So, if you are carrying extra pounds, it's important to stick to the recommended drinking guidelines – or even less.' The NHS recommends women should not regularly drink more than 2-3 units of alcohol (the amount in a 175ml glass of wine) a day, while men shouldn't regularly drink more than 3-4 units daily (roughly the amount in a pint of beer or cider). And by drinking less alcohol, you'll automatically be cutting down your Syns, so it will be great for your weight loss, too. Double bubble!

## Body Magic is liver magic

Scientists at the University of Sydney in Australia discovered that doing any

kind of aerobic exercise for eight weeks – whether high-intensity workouts or something more moderate like brisk walking – reduced liver fat in some cases by as much as 29 per cent.

They also found that some people lost fat in their liver without losing any obvious weight on the scales. So remember, if you do have a week when you don't lose as much as you hoped, that doesn't mean your liver isn't benefiting – you still might be shedding harmful fat from your organs.

## What to do if you're concerned

Unlike most parts of your body, your liver doesn't send out signals to say it's suffering. 'Some people might get a bit of discomfort on the right side of their tummy if the liver is distended, but most of the time people have no idea that they have a problem,' says Philip Newsome. It's also worth bearing in mind that having Type 2 diabetes, high cholesterol or high blood pressure can increase your risk of developing fat in the liver. If you're reading this and are worried, make your first stop your GP – they can do a simple blood test to check levels of enzymes that might be raised. If that's the case, you could be referred for further tests, such as a scan to explore whether you have any liver scarring.

## It's never too late

Only a few people with fatty liver go on to develop stage two of the condition, called non-alcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH). It's estimated that around two to five per cent of the population has NASH. 'Even then, it can be a very slow process, taking 40-50 years for damage to appear – whereas similar effects from alcohol occur much more quickly,' says Nick Sheron. So, by taking steps now to counteract any fat build-up, you can reduce your risk... it's never too late to show your liver some love!



## 'Losing weight gave me a healthier liver'

**Charlotte Ratcliffe, 43, lives in Daventry, Northamptonshire. She joined Slimming World weighing 19st 8lbs and has lost 7st 4½lbs so far at Kate Isaac's group in Daventry.**

'Caring for my father – who suffered ailments linked to excess weight – made me worry about my own health, so I joined my local Slimming World group. A few weeks later, I went for my annual blood test (recommended as I'd had gestational diabetes) and I was diagnosed with a fatty liver.

I carried on Food Optimising... and when I went back after three months for a follow-up test, my liver reading had hugely improved. Even though I'd only lost around 1½st at that point, my results had already gone from worryingly high to the upper end of normal.

Soon afterwards, my dad passed away due to a combination of weight-related illnesses. He'd been so proud of my slimdown that I was determined to stick with it. My liver readings continued to improve and are now very healthy – plus my blood sugar is normal, so I'm less likely to develop Type 2 diabetes in the future, too.

I just wish my dad could see me now! I've dropped eight dress sizes and I'm so full of energy. I'm even planning to take part in a 20-mile extreme mud run next year. Best of all, I can be a healthy mum to my two children for years to come.'

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