

# Fatty liver in non-drinkers: How to spot and treat it early

With some lifestyle changes, this common disease can be prevented and reversed, says gastroenterologist Bhavesh Doshi

It is easy to take your liver for granted. Quietly working behind the scenes, it helps break down food, store nutrients and filter harmful substances. But this vital organ can be affected by conditions that often develop with little warning – including the common non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD).

As the name suggests, NAFLD occurs when excess fat builds up in the liver in people who drink little to no alcohol. Often without symptoms early on, it tends to appear alongside other lifestyle-related health issues, says Mount Alvernia Hospital gastroenterologist Bhavesh Doshi. Here, he explains the factors behind its rise and how to protect your liver.

## Q Who is most at risk for NAFLD and are there early signs to look out for?

People who are overweight or have conditions like type 2 diabetes, high cholesterol or high blood pressure may be more likely to develop NAFLD. The risk is also higher among those with a family history of liver conditions and certain ethnic groups, such as Asians and Hispanics. Men and older adults are generally more affected.

Some people with NAFLD may feel tired, notice discomfort in the upper right side of the abdomen or have slightly abnormal liver results during a routine check-up. In more advanced stages, signs can include jaundice (yellowing of the skin or eyes), leg swelling or unexplained weight loss.

## Q What happens if NAFLD is left untreated and can it be reversed?

NAFLD can quietly progress to a more severe form of inflammation. If left unchecked, it may cause scarring (called fibrosis), and in advanced stages, may lead to cirrhosis or even liver cancer.



Pain in the upper right abdomen may signal fatty liver, but symptoms often appear only in later stages. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

The good news is that NAFLD can often be reversed in its early stages, especially with healthy lifestyle changes. While no medication is currently approved specifically for NAFLD, diet and exercise remain the most effective way to reverse the condition and protect your liver.

## Q What lifestyle changes can help prevent or manage NAFLD effectively?

The Mediterranean diet is often recommended – think plenty of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, nuts, fish or white meat, and healthy fats like olive oil. Reducing your intake of sugary drinks, processed foods and red meats can also help lower liver fat and improve overall metabolic health.

Both aerobic exercises (like brisk walking or swimming) and strength training have been shown to reduce fat in the liver, even without dramatic weight loss. Losing just 5 per cent of your body weight may improve liver condition, and more significant weight loss (around 7 to 10 per cent) may help reduce inflammation and scarring.

It is also best to limit alcohol and cut back on sugary drinks and snacks, as these can make liver damage worse over time. The bottom line: Building healthy habits – even small ones – can go a long way in protecting your liver.



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