A fatty liver is larger and lighter in color than a healthy liver. This is because fat builds up in the liver and creates color and size changes. Sometimes the liver tissue can become inflamed and scarred.

Some people with fatty liver have fat build up in the liver cells but the liver is still normal. This is known as Non-Alcoholic Fatty Liver Disease (NAFLD). Some people with fatty liver get inflammation and liver cell damage. This form of fatty liver is called Non-Alcoholic Steatohepatitis (NASH).

NASH can lead to scarring of the liver, called cirrhosis. At least 20% of people with NASH will have cirrhosis in their lifetime. The rate of liver scarring is higher with NASH than NAFLD. NAFLD and NASH raise your risk for heart disease and cancer. Heart disease and cancer are the top two causes of death for people with NASH.

Why “non-alcoholic” fatty liver?

Fatty liver is called non-alcoholic for women who have less than 14 drinks per week, and men who drink less than 21 drinks per week.

Risk factors for developing NASH

- Weight gain
- Obesity (abdominal fat or apple shaped)
- Inactive lifestyle
- Diabetes or prediabetes
- High liver enzymes
- Smoking
- High blood pressure
- Abnormal cholesterol

Signs and symptoms of fatty liver

- Most do not show symptoms
- May feel tired, or pain in the right upper stomach area
- Blood tests often show high GGT, AST, and ALT
- Sometimes fatty liver is seen on an imaging study that was done for other reasons
How is fatty liver diagnosed?

Your provider will check for other causes of liver damage like viral hepatitis, iron level, autoimmune liver disease, and others. They will also look at alcohol intake and factors for fatty liver. Your provider may calculate a FIB-4 score. This is a noninvasive tool for identifying patients whose NAFLD has advanced to liver fibrosis. It relies on clinical information and certain labs to evaluate the degree of fibrosis in the liver. Your provider may also order a Fibro Scan, which is another way of identifying possible liver fibrosis or scarring. A Fibro Scan measures the stiffness of the liver tissue to see how much scarring is in the liver. Your provider will explain the results of the test if completed.

Treatment for fatty liver

Many drugs have been studied in the treatment of NASH. Little is known if any drug is helpful in slowing the disease process. The most helpful treatments for nonalcoholic fatty liver disease are, exercise, weight loss, and healthy eating.

Exercise

The good news is any exercise you do will help with treating fatty liver disease. Any kind of exercise at moderate level, for 3 hours (total per week) will help with healing. If you have not been active for a while, start with only 10-15 minutes, three to four times a week. Try to work your way up to a total of three hours of exercise a week.

For Effective Management of NAFLD:
At least MODERATE INTENSITY
Total of 3 hours/week:
• 30 minutes 6 days a week or
• 45 minutes 4 days a week or
• 60 minutes 3 days a week

Weight loss

Losing as little as 3-5% of your body weight can lower liver fat. Losing 10% or more can reduce inflammation, scarring, and fibrosis.

Healthy eating

A healthy diet is the source of good health. This is the first place to start to heal from fatty liver disease. Good nutrition includes whole grains, vegetables, fruits, legumes, and lean proteins.