



Fatty Liver

Fatty liver is found in over 20% of North American Caucasians. It is a condition caused by excess fat deposition in the liver. Its commonest causes include obesity and alcohol excess. In recent years, the number of individuals with fatty liver, who do not drink, or do not drink excessively, is increasing. In these individuals, excess fat in the liver maybe related to obesity, diabetes mellitus or a tendency towards diabetes, and high cholesterol or high triglycerides (another form of fat in the blood).

While previously thought to be a benign condition, it is now recognized that 25% of individuals with fatty liver may subsequently develop extensive scarring of the liver leading to cirrhosis.

Fatty liver disease warrants further investigation by in most individuals. Investigation includes a full history to identify any risk factors such as weight gain or family history of diabetes, or symptoms such as abdominal pain or fatigue. Investigation also includes a physical exam looking for evidence of an enlarged or “swollen” liver. Liver blood tests are nearly always abnormal. Blood levels of cholesterol and triglycerides are also checked as well as a blood sugar level looking for evidence of diabetes. The amount of scarring of the liver, if any, cannot be identified from a liver scan and thus most individuals with fatty liver require a liver biopsy. This procedure can be done as a day case and does not involve any surgery.

Treatment is aimed at weight reduction and a reduction or abstinence from alcohol where appropriate. Treatment also aims to normalize the cholesterol and triglyceride level in the blood, which requires caution as many of the drugs used to lower cholesterol may also cause abnormal liver blood tests. There are other promising new therapies on the horizon that are currently on a trial basis for fatty liver.

In summary, fatty liver is usually a benign condition but requires investigation in all to identify individuals “at risk” for the development of scarring or cirrhosis of the liver.