

Drop the bottle and get active

Fatty liver disease is linked to, among other things, obesity and alcohol use

Here's another reason to be mindful of the obesity epidemic in the United States: obesity brings an increased risk of fatty liver disease, an ailment that's treatable but could mean serious complications.

[David Rzepczynski, MD](#), a gastroenterologist at OSF HealthCare, describes the liver as an "extremely important" factory for the body. It performs many functions, like detoxifying medications, aiding digestion and making cholesterol, proteins and amino acids that help the body function. And have you ever missed a meal? You can thank your liver for releasing glucose and giving you energy.

All those "factory functions" make it critical to be watchful of fatty liver disease. As the name suggests, the disease describes an accumulation of fatty cells in the liver. Dr. Rzepczynski says it takes just 5% of cells with increased fat to make a diagnosis, but some obese people have 100% of cells with fat.

Hepatitis C and excessive alcohol use can cause fatty liver disease or are at least linked to it. But you can still get fatty liver if you're not a heavy drinker, and that's where your weight comes into play.

"The big driving force of fatty liver disease is what we call the metabolic syndrome," Dr. Rzepczynski explains. "There are five factors: obesity, diabetes, hypertension [high blood pressure], high cholesterol and insulin resistance."

Dr. Rzepczynski adds that fatty liver disease may cause pain in the upper abdomen, but it mostly comes without symptoms. So if any of those five risk factors apply to you or if you're a heavy drinker, don't wait. Talk to your health care provider about getting your liver looked at.

A doctor will likely start with a blood test, Dr. Rzepczynski says. An ultrasound or biopsy may also be needed. The next step: lose weight.

"It doesn't have to be getting back to your ideal body weight," Dr. Rzepczynski says. "Losing 5% of your weight can reduce fat in the liver. Losing 7% will help reverse some of the inflammation associated with fatty liver. And some studies have even shown that losing 10% or more might reverse some of the scarring."

While it may be a bit alarming, left unchecked, fatty liver disease can lead to a serious condition called cirrhosis, or scarring, of the liver.

"You have normal liver tissue replaced by scar tissue," Dr. Rzepczynski says. "When that occurs, you have a loss of liver function. You have less liver cells performing their duties."

Cirrhosis of the liver can cause the organ to fail, making a transplant necessary. Liver issues can also mean an increased risk of heart disease, stroke and cancer, particularly breast and colon cancer.

Learn more about [fatty liver disease](#) and [other gastroenterology care](#) on the OSF HealthCare website.