BY LYN CRAVEN
What is a fatty liver?
Fatty liver is the build-up of excess fat in the liver cells. It is normal for your liver to contain some fat, however, if there is more fat than 10% of your liver's weight present in the liver, then you have fatty liver and this can develop into more serious complications.

Fatty liver disease is quite common in Western countries. Statistics indicate that it affects around one in every 10 people. It is caused by a build-up of fats in the liver, which replace the healthy tissue and trigger enlargement of the rest of the liver cells. The liver then becomes slightly enlarged and heavier due to the additional fat.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?
Fatty liver (also known as 'steatosis') may cause no damage, but sometimes the excess fat leads to inflammation of the liver and results in a condition called steatohepatitis that involves liver damage. Sometimes inflammation from a fatty liver is linked to alcohol abuse, which is known as alcoholic steatohepatitis. Otherwise the condition is called non-alcoholic steatohepatitis or NASH.

If the disease gets worse, you may experience fatigue, weight loss, abdominal discomfort, weakness, confusion, jaundice (your skin or even eyes start to become yellow) and some people may experience fever. Immunity is often impaired and there may be elevated cholesterol and triglycerides in the blood. Weight loss appears to be a problem and excess weight commonly accumulates around the abdominal area. Headaches and migraines are other symptoms. In some cases, people may present with type-2 diabetes. Fatigue is common and a general feeling of being unwell is typical.

Liver discomfort is often noted during palpation (hand pressure) in a physical examination. Gallstones composed of cholesterol and bile salts may be present, along with elevation of the liver enzymes. An inflamed liver may become scarred and hardened over time, resulting in cirrhosis, which is a serious condition often culminating in liver failure.

Fatty liver is a condition which is more likely to occur in middle-aged and overweight people. Eating excess calories may mean that the liver is unable to process and break down fats efficiently, allowing too much fat to accumulate. Rapid weight loss and malnutrition may also lead to fatty liver, as well as certain illnesses such as tuberculosis, intestinal by-pass surgery for obesity, and some drugs such as corticosteroids. It may even occur in diabetic people who do not drink alcohol. However, some people develop fatty liver even if they have none of the above conditions.

FUNCTIONS OF THE LIVER AND WHY YOU NEED A HEALTHY ONE
The liver is the largest internal organ. In oriental medicine it is considered the hottest organ in the body and is said to resonate to a yang (male) energy. The emotions of anger and aggression are stored at the cellular level of the liver and, if allowed to accumulate due to the emotional nature of the person, can have a negative impact on the overall physiological function of the liver.

The liver is our filtering and detoxifying ‘factory’. It has a huge job to do. When it is congested with excess fat, it cannot filter, cleanse and detoxify the bloodstream efficiently, so the blood becomes overloaded with toxins and fat. In turn, the blood carries these around the body in its attempt to feed and nourish the cells, but this leads to damage of tissues, organs and muscles, which often results in autoimmunity disorders.

Your liver is responsible for the metabolism of everything that you ingest - foods, fats, hormones, drugs, chemicals and many other substances. Its job is to neutralise them or convert them to other forms by manufacturing special enzymes.

The bile produced by the liver is stored in the gall bladder and then used to emulsify dietary fats. A healthy liver is able to regulate fat metabolism by ‘burning’ fat and moving any excess out of the body through the bile and into the gut for expulsion. A healthy liver can achieve weight loss and maintain balanced weight easier. If you have a fatty liver, you may find it harder to lose weight in spite of any diet that you may have tried. This is due to the fatty liver storing fat rather than burning it off. When it is overloaded with excess fat, it simply cannot function properly and becomes clogged with the excess fat.

This is when serious health disorders can occur.

Fat-soluble vitamins, namely A, D, E and K, need bile in order to be absorbed by the body.

The liver converts carbohydrates into glucose for instantly available energy. The liver converts glucose into its storage form, glycogen. When blood sugar levels drop [hypoglycemia], glycogen is converted back to glucose to provide energy.

The liver changes ammonium compounds (toxic by-products of protein metabolism) into urea which is then excreted in the urine. Amino acids from protein foods are sent to the liver for the production of bodily proteins such as hormones. The liver is involved in constant hormone metabolism and assists in maintaining hormonal equilibrium. A healthy liver also means a strong, healthy immune system.
How Can Natural Therapy Help?

Herbal and homeopathic remedies are given to detoxify the system and strengthen the liver by aiding regeneration of liver cells. Depending on how chronic is the problem, these remedies could be taken for up to six months or more. Often some homeopathic detox remedies are changed over a period of time depending on the detox program.

St Mary’s Thistle is what I consider to be the prime herb for fatty liver. It is quite safe to take over an extended period for protection and maintenance.

The diet needs to be addressed and more spring or filtered water consumed, along with fresh vegetable juices. Food should be fresh and ideally prepared by yourself. All packaged, take-away, fatty foods or foods containing preservatives, sugar, oils and margarine, etc, should be avoided. If possible, organic foods should be consumed and dairy and saturated fats avoided.

Appropriate amino-acid supplements may also be prescribed for your detox regime. These are very important to assist in regeneration of the detoxification pathway. A detox regime (contrary to what has been said in recent TV programs) does not mean that you must abstain from solid foods, provided your diet contains fresh, healthy meals in conjunction with specific remedies to help eliminate toxins and improve the entire metabolic function.

Complying with the correct prescribed remedies over a few months can achieve optimal health. Consistency is the key here. Skipping a few days here and there will not allow any remedies to work efficiently.

I have seen excellent results with people who have been prescribed with fatty liver. I don’t feel that changing the diet alone and eliminating offending substances alone is sufficient. I firmly believe that natural remedies, when prescribed professionally, can generate healing at a very deep cellular level and regenerate liver cells.

However, if someone is experiencing alcohol addiction, they would also require counselling and support to enable them to correctly follow a detoxification and regeneration program. Remedies can also be prescribed to assist in the addiction and withdrawal. The underlying emotional factors here need to be addressed and supported.

Weight loss regimes, including control of diabetes, are also essential to achieve positive results. Weight loss should be gradual and not rapid, otherwise this will be detrimental by actually contributing to fatty liver and liver-cell damage. Anyone who experiences a detoxification and regeneration program can not only expect to resolve, regenerate and heal the fatty liver, but will achieve vital energy, a healthier and slimmer body and optimal health. Your liver has the capability, when supported and nurtured, to regenerate its cells in six weeks.

However, this does not mean that you should stop taking prescribed remedies after this time, since your aim is to sufficiently detoxify your body to create a stronger immunity, better organ function and cleaner blood. By being consistent, you may discover that particular cravings and addictions will no longer exist.

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**TREATMENT**

If alcoholism is the cause, the excess fat can disappear when people stop drinking (often within six weeks). However, I still feel it is useful to take herbal remedies, particularly St Mary’s Thistle (see next column), to support the healing process of the liver.

If the cause is not identified and remedied, fatty liver can have serious consequences. For example, if excessive alcohol use continues or a drug causing fatty liver is not stopped, repeated liver injury may eventually lead to cirrhosis.

Treatment focuses on minimising or eliminating the cause. People need to cease drinking, lose weight, take measures to control diabetes if they have it, and work to lower triglyceride levels, while being aware that many drugs, such as cholesterol lowering drugs, can exert toxic effects on the liver. Observing diet and making lifestyle changes may be a healthier option.

**Healthy liver**

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**TESTS USED TO DIAGNOSE FATTY LIVER DISEASE INCLUDE:**

- Medical history, including the patient’s drug and alcohol consumption.
- Physical examination – palpation.
- Blood tests to check liver enzymes - called ‘liver function tests’.
- Blood test to check blood triglyceride (fat) levels.
  (However, this test is not considered conclusive as some cases of fatty liver do not present with raised blood triglycerides.)
- Tests to rule out other liver diseases, such as haemochromatosis or viral hepatitis, which may cause similar symptoms.
- Ultrasound, CT scan or MRI of the liver, which helps to rule out other conditions that mimic the symptoms of fatty liver disease, such as a liver tumour or obstruction of the bile duct. This would also include any presence of haemangiomata (small cysts on the liver). Haemangiomatas are often linked to exposure to sheep or eating lamb that is not properly cooked; the parasites take habitation in the host, that is, the liver.
- Biopsy – often advised only if other tests are inconclusive, if non-alcoholic steatohepatitis is suspected or if tests reveal a significant degree of liver dysfunction.

The live blood screening [LBS] test allows you to see how the liver is functioning, whereas the conventional liver function test – contrary its name – will only show damage. LBS tests are conducted by some naturopaths or specific laboratories with qualified technicians who specialise in LBS and other allergy/immune tests. I refer people to a specialised lab, and full reports are issued which will also indicate how other organ/systems are working.