

## Don't let your liver get too fat

Danny Siu

LAST WEEK WE talked about how obesity and unhealthy eating habits can hurt our liver. This week we look into the complications of fatty liver and ways to deal with it.

The liver is the largest internal organ in our body. It performs vital functions to support nearly every other organ. When it has more than 5 percent excess fat, it is considered a fatty liver, a chronic disease with a high incidence in the SAR. The most common is non-alcoholic fatty liver, or NAFLD – 27 percent of adult Hongkongers suffer from it.

If fatty liver goes on without proper treatment, the liver may become inflamed and its function will reduce. Liver inflammation can lead to scarring (cirrhosis). Over time, cirrhosis can cause liver failure and liver cancer, eventually leading to death.

NAFLD is usually detected via routine blood testing, fat shown on the ultrasound image, enlarged liver during physical exam, or through fibroscan.

It takes time for cirrhosis to develop so it is important to control fatty liver before it gets worse.

Currently there is no specific medication to treat NAFLD, but some studies suggest that nutritional supplements can help to reverse fatty liver. So a fatty liver diagnosis is not the end of the world.

Polyunsaturated fatty acids – essential phospholipids, or EPL – can help. EPL is a major component of cell membranes that normalizes liver function and enzymatic activity of liver cells, promoting the regeneration of the cells. If liver cells are inflamed, both EPL and cell structure will be lost so replenishing EPL has protective and regenerative effects.

Vitamin E is an antioxidant that helps protect the liver by neutralizing the damage caused by inflammation and preventing NAFLD progression. But it may increase the risk of prostate cancer in men.

In addition to supplements, living a healthy lifestyle – quitting smoking, eating a balanced diet and regular exercise can help reduce the chance of fatty liver.

Patients with fatty liver should see their doctor on a regular basis to monitor liver function and discuss the benefits and risks of supplements. As fatty liver usually won't give you obvious symptoms in the early stages, you should consult a doctor if you have risk factors or signs suspicious for fatty liver.

A healthy liver is essential to good health. It is never too late to live a healthy lifestyle and protect the liver.

• Dr Danny Siu Ka-fai is a specialist in gastroenterology and hepatology

