

How you can look after your liver

Danny Siu

HONG KONG IS considered a food paradise as you can find a full range of fantastic restaurants and cuisines all over the city. With so many new eateries opening every day, Hongkongers never get bored of checking out the new dining spots.

However, eating out often can be bad for health and especially the liver.

The liver is the largest internal organ in the body.

It supports almost every other organ and performs functions including detoxifying the blood and producing bile to digest fats. It is one of the most important organs to keep us healthy.

While it is normal to have some fat in the liver, if more than 5 percent of the liver's weight is fat, it is called a fatty liver. Fatty liver may lead to hepatitis, cirrhosis

and even liver cancer if it is not treated properly – it can be life-threatening if left untreated.

There are mainly two types of fatty liver disease: alcoholic fatty liver and nonalcoholic fatty liver, or NAFLD.

NAFLD is the most common chronic liver disease in the world. According to a study by the Chinese University of Hong Kong, about 27 percent of Hong Kong's adult population suffers from NAFLD, which means one in three adults are NAFLD patients.

The prevalence increases with age, and there are more than 100,000 new cases every year.

The cause of NAFLD is still not completely understood, but in most cases it is linked to central obesity and unhealthy eating habits, type 2 diabetes, and high levels of cholesterol and triglycerides in the blood. Other factors

including metabolic syndrome, hypothyroidism and a high intake of fructose sugar may also increase the risk of developing NAFLD.

People with NAFLD generally have no obvious symptoms in the early stages. But some patients may experience fatigue, weight loss and abdominal pains.

NAFLD is usually found with abnormal liver tests during routine blood testing, fat shown on the ultrasound image, enlarged liver during physical exam, or through fibroscan.

Fatty liver is a chronic disease, but it may worsen with time. The best way to avoid this silent killer is to understand it and prevent it before it is too late.

Next week we are going to talk about the ways to deal with fatty liver.

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

