

Holiday Eating Tips for a Healthy Liver!

It's almost that time of the year again! We know it is a holiday season, but your liver doesn't, hence it's a good time to start making action plans to stay on track with your health goals through the season.

As to be expected, the holiday season is often full of high-calorie or sugary treats, and with a constant stream of food and alcohol available at parties and gatherings, it is often easy to lose track of what, when and how much we eat and drink. The lack of a routine during the holidays was another factor that for some people, this can lead to unwanted weight gain or giving your liver extra stress during holidays.

Disrupted schedules, less regular exercise, and increased stress levels can lead to mindless eating and poor food choices. The most important thing is holidays are meant to be enjoyed. The key is finding a balance that works for you. By making a few conscious choices, you can indulge in the season's best without setting back your liver health.

I was recently diagnosed with fatty liver disease, and I am wondering, "how does fat get into my liver?"

Fatty liver, as the name suggests, refers to a build-up of fat in the liver. While a healthy liver contains small amounts of fat, a build-up of fat amounting to more than 5% of your liver's weight can lead to fatty liver disease.

Fatty liver disease is more common in individuals who are overweight or obese, but it can also occur in adults with healthy body weights.

There are two main medical terms for fatty liver disease: **metabolic dysfunction-associated steatotic liver disease**, or MASLD for short, and **metabolic dysfunction-associated steatohepatitis**, or MASH for short.

Fatty liver disease isn't necessarily harmful at first. But it's a progressive disease. That means it gets worse slowly over time.

Metabolic dysfunction–associated steatotic liver disease (MASLD) is the most common form of liver disease in Canada, affecting at least 25% of all adults.

From the latest statistics, approximately 8 million Canadians are affected by MASLD. 25% of those living with MASLD develop the more advanced form of fatty liver disease, which causes the liver to swell and become damaged. Most people with fatty liver disease don't get cirrhosis or MASH. But they are still at increased risk of heart disease, diabetes, kidney disease and cancer.

There is currently no cure for fatty liver disease. The good news is, if detected early, fatty liver disease can be improved, or even reversed, with lifestyle and nutrition modifications.

I was told that liver is one of the largest organs in our body, it is like the “powerhouse”.

The liver is part of the digestive system. It is the largest solid organ in the body. In adults, the liver can weigh up to 1.5 kg (3.3 lbs).

The liver can be found in the upper right-hand side of the belly. All blood that leaves the stomach and intestine must pass through liver.

The liver is essential for proper nutrition, overall health and well-being. Liver does many different functions in our body silently.

When was the last time you thought about your liver? We feel our heart beating in our chest; we hear our stomach growling when we are hungry. We don't feel our liver and that could be how sometimes we take our liver for granted because we don't feel it even if it is sick.

The liver helps with digestion, storage and supplying nutrients such as sugar (glucose), fat, protein, vitamins and minerals to our bodies. It also plays a crucial role in detoxification and immune responses. These are just a few jobs the liver performs day in and day out, in fact, the liver performs hundreds of different jobs in our body to keep us healthy.

I have been diagnosed with fatty liver disease, and I do not have any symptoms. Do I need to be concerned?

With fatty liver disease, there are usually no signs or symptoms, especially in its early stages, but as the disease progresses, signs may begin to appear. These symptoms include

- Unexplained weight loss
- Pain in the upper right abdomen
- Fatigue and weakness
- Yellowing of the eyes and skin (jaundice)
- Shortness of breath
- Swelling in the legs, ankles, feet, and/or abdomen
- Loss of appetite
- Itchy skin

How is fatty liver disease diagnosed?

The most common way we first detect that the liver may not be healthy is through routine blood tests that check liver enzymes. These tests can show early signs of liver stress, even before symptoms appear, so your yearly visit with your family physician is very important.

If blood tests suggest a problem, the next step is often a liver ultrasound. This imaging test gives us a look at the liver, identify signs of fat buildup and assess for liver scarring. If fat is seen in the liver, and other causes are ruled out, we can diagnose fatty liver disease, ideally early enough to take steps to reverse the damage.

Are there any risk factors to developing fatty liver disease?

Anyone can develop a fatty liver. People with fatty liver are more likely to already have or are at higher risk of diabetes, heart disease, high cholesterol and high blood pressure. Other causes of fatty liver or liver damage can include starvation and rapid weight loss, genetic factors, and environmental exposures like drugs or chemicals.

I read from the social media that “a liver cleanse diet” is all I need to get my liver back in shape?

Despite the promise of a newer, healthier you from well-marketed products and programs that are meant to cleanse your digestive system, the liver does not need to be cleansed – it does that job itself.

Liver cleansing diets can be harmful as they do not provide all the nutrients you need or may expose your liver to harmful substances. They also don't work to repair liver damage.

My friends have recommended herbal teas and supplements, they are safe, natural and help “improve” the liver health.

Most herbal substances lack scientific evidence of efficacy and may cause liver toxicity. There have been rare cases of acute liver inflammation and liver failure associated with usage of certain "natural" supplements.

Over the holidays season, I will be busy and may miss a meal or two. Should I take vitamins and mineral supplements to make sure that I meet the nutrients required for my body instead?

When we eat a variety of nutritious foods, taking vitamin and mineral supplements is not generally required.

Taking supplements cannot make up for unhealthy eating habits such as skipping meals, emotional eating, excessively snacking. Canada's Food Guide recommends vegetables and fruits, whole-grain foods, and protein foods as part of a nutritious food plan.

Do you have any additional information which I should watch before I purchase a supplement?

- No supplement has been proved to cure diseases such as fatty liver, cancer, diabetes, heart disease, or digestive problems. Always stay cautious of supplements that promise quick and dramatic results.
- A generic brand (or store brand) often works just as well as a name-brand supplement. Look for generic brands that contain the same amount of vitamins and minerals as the name brand.

I drink coffee every day and I was told to cut out from my diet because coffee is harmful for people with fatty liver.

Black coffee has liver protective effects and may slow disease progression. Drinking 2-3 cups black coffee each day is potentially beneficial for most patients with **metabolic dysfunction–associated steatotic liver disease (MASLD)**.

I have been avoiding carbohydrates since I was diagnosed with fatty liver disease, I read that all carbohydrates are harmful.

Carbohydrates like protein and fat are equally essential in our diets. It is important to consume adequate carbohydrates every day as they act as the main source of energy used by our bodies.

Carbohydrates occur naturally in nutritious foods such as grains, fruits, starchy vegetables, legumes and dairy.

Whole grains are packed with nutrients such as fibre, protein and B-vitamins. The benefits include helping us to stay healthy and full longer.

Fruits and vegetables are packed with fibre, vitamins and minerals, while legumes are versatile plant-based protein and fibre sources. Dairy products such as milk and yogurt are packed with complete protein, calcium and vitamin D and the benefits include keeping our bones strong and healthy.

But carbohydrate foods are not created equal. Excessive consumption of simple sugars, especially high fructose corn syrup, is linked to increase in fat build up in the liver.

Are there any special diets such as intermittent fasting which you would recommend helping with fatty liver?

Strategies such as intermittent fasting can promote weight loss, improve insulin sensitivity, and reduce liver fat when properly guided and monitored. It is important to take note that everybody is different. There is no one special diet that fits all. If you would like to start any kind of diet, please speak with your doctors and/or dietitians first to find out if you are suitable, without compromising your health and wellbeing.

Is Mediterranean Style of Eating Good for My Liver Health?

Following a Mediterranean style of eating may help some people with fatty liver disease. That's because this style of eating helps control our appetite and reduce portion sizes. It is also higher in nutrients like fibre, healthy fats, vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants while lower in unhealthy fats, red and processed meats, refined grains, and sugar.

What are the strategies would you recommend helping me eat well for my liver over the holidays season?

- **Mediterranean style of eating and follow the 80/20 rule:**
aim to make sure 80 percent of your meals align with your regular health routine and goals. To put this into practice, I enjoy a small portion of my favorite treats and fill the other 80 percent of my plate with nutritious foods.
- **Plan ahead:**
help me make sure I stick to my plan, make better food choices, and avoid overeating. For me, this looks like eating a light snack of fiber and protein before a holiday party that I know may have lots of high-calorie treats can help keep my blood sugar levels regulated and can curb my appetite so that I avoid mindless eating.
- **Stay active:**

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Keep moving, any exercise that you enjoy. Be it a walk, a swim or taichi. Consider how exercise will help you feel better and more energized after a big meal.

- **Practice portion control:**

While I love to enjoy my favorite holiday foods as much as the next person, I always try to do so in moderation. I like to start by making sure I include a variety of colorful veggies (with dressing at the side) and lean protein such as chicken, fish, and legumes on my plate and then opt for smaller portions of high-calorie foods and sweet treats.

- **Stay hydrated:**

Drinking adequate and regular water throughout the day can help you feel fuller and avoid overeating. Good hydration is important for overall good health.

Limit intake of alcohol and high calories beverages, they can be high in calories and added sugar, making it easier to push your healthy habits to the side.

There are healthier alternatives, such as infused water, tea, herbal tea, black coffee, low fat milk, unsweetened plant-based beverage or club soda.

- **Stay mindful and be flexible with your holiday meals:**

I often would slow down and savor each bite of my food, stop eating when I feel satisfied rather than overly full.

When it comes to holidays, understand that perfection is not the goal and that occasional indulgences are part of a balanced lifestyle. If you do overindulge in one meal, accept it, move on, and get back on track with your healthy choices. It's more about the accumulation of your food choices over time rather than singling out one or two events.

Before we round up, in addition to eating a well-balanced meal, what kind of lifestyle should one adopt to stay healthy over the holidays season?

In addition to eating healthily, being physically active, having good sleep and stress management are also important. Speak to your physician or healthcare team if you feel you might have anxiety or depression.

How can Alberta Healthy Living Program help support the Chinese in the community, living with fatty liver disease and/or gastrointestinal tract medical conditions (such as acid reflux):

- We have Registered Dietitian speaking both Mandarin and Cantonese who can offer one-on-one advice via phone, Zoom or in person meeting.
- These services are free of charge and are provided by Alberta Health. You do not need a referral from a health care provider - you can just call to book appointment.
- All our programs and services can be accessed through one toll-free number: 1-844-527-1160.
- Better choices, better health (BCBH) for chronic disease management and BCBH-chronic pain that are offered in Cantonese, and they can register for this 6-week program (one 2.5-hour session per week) by calling one toll-free: 1-844-527-1160.