Covid pandemic could lead to tens of thousands more liver disease cases in 2021, warns charity

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The British Liver Trust is calling for every person in the UK to consider their liver health and take a simple quiz to assess their risk during January after adults across the UK admit to making unhealthy lifestyle choices in 2020.

Over a million adults in the UK may currently have the early stages of liver disease but are unaware and have no symptoms.[1,3.] Worryingly, rising rates of obesity means that 150,000 children could also have non-alcohol related fatty liver disease.[2]

January is often a time that people take stock after the Christmas period but this year it is even more important as the numbers at risk have also increased during the Covid pandemic. Many people have increased their alcohol consumption and gained weight during lockdown – the two biggest risk factors for developing liver disease.

The British Liver Trust is calling for the nation to improve their liver health and find out more about the risk factors during National Love Your Liver month.

The charity has issued the stark warning after:

- One in five adults are thought to be at risk due to either being overweight or drinking too much alcohol.[3]
- 4000 people in 2020 missed a free liver scan as the charities Love Your Liver Roadshow had to be cancelled.[4]
- An analysis of previous years data indicates 650 of those would have shown signs of possible liver damage.
- 28% of people admitted to drinking more during lockdown.[5]
- 42% have gained weight during the past year.[6]

The British Liver Trust is urging people to take their ‘At Risk’ screening tool: https://www.britishlivertrust.org.uk/love-your-liver-screener

The charity is also launching a free new diet fact sheet which is packed full of tips on what to eat to improve your liver health:

Most liver disease can be prevented with simple lifestyle changes. More than 90% is due to three main risk factors: obesity, alcohol and viral hepatitis. The British Liver Trust’s Love Your Liver campaign focuses on three simple steps to improve your liver health: https://www.britishlivertrust.org.uk/love-your-liver-screener

- Drink less than 14 units of alcohol and have three consecutive days off alcohol every week
- Eat a healthy diet and take more exercise
- Know the risk factors for viral hepatitis and get tested or vaccinated if at risk. There are now highly effective cures for hepatitis

Before the pandemic, the Love Your Liver roadshows helped to raise awareness of the risk factors for liver disease among the general population.

Vanessa Hebditch, Director of Policy and Communications at the British Liver Trust says: “In early 2020, our *Love Your Liver* health screening roadshow was ready to tour the nation, offering free liver health checks to the general public at high streets up and down the county.

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“Unfortunately, Covid-19 forced us to postpone the roadshow. That meant that around 4,000 people will have missed out on a free liver health check. If we look at the statistics from previous Roadshows, around 650 of those would have shown signs of possible liver damage.

“We are very concerned that while thousands will have missed out on valuable liver health advice, some of those people will already have undiagnosed liver disease which won’t show symptoms until the very late stages when treatment options are limited.

“2020 was a really stressful year for everyone. We know from our research that a lot of people drank more alcohol and ate unhealthier food last year – two major risk factors for liver disease. We also know that some people have missed out on appointments and treatment while healthcare resources have been diverted elsewhere as a result of the pandemic.”

Beth came to a Love Your Liver roadshow in 2019. She says: “I wasn't sure what state my liver would be and it has always concerned me as I have often used alcohol to relieve stress throughout my life.

“I was nervous going in for the test when I saw the roadshow but knew that I needed to know the truth of what I was doing to my liver.

“It does take guts to have a liver scan and it was good to know the result gave me a chance to reflect and take some steps in my life to be stronger willed in making healthier choices.”

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