

Millions living with fatty liver disease without knowing it, UK study suggests

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New research released today at the UK's leading liver conference shows that millions of people in the UK are living with fatty liver disease without a diagnosis. Researchers presenting new data at the British Association for the Study of the Liver (BASL) conference found that only 2.42% of people had a recorded diagnosis of metabolic dysfunction-associated steatotic liver disease (MASLD) in 2022, despite estimates that around one in four UK adults may have the condition.

MASLD often causes no symptoms in its early stages and is frequently identified only through investigation of other health conditions, meaning many people are unaware they have liver disease until significant damage has occurred.

Researchers from Queen Mary University of London and Barts Health NHS Trust analysed routinely collected primary-care records from more than 11.7 million people and found that just 2.42% had a recorded diagnosis of MASLD in 2022. This was almost five times higher than in 2012, when 0.52% had a recorded diagnosis. Yet this remains substantially below estimates that around one in four adults in the UK have MASLD, suggesting a significant gap between the number of people likely to have the condition and those being diagnosed.

The findings suggest that, despite the rapid increase in recorded diagnoses, millions of people with MASLD may still be going undiagnosed. The research also identified gaps in the routine information available to assess the risk of liver damage and scarring. Among people diagnosed with MASLD after 2015, only one in five had the routine blood-test results needed to assess their risk of liver scarring.

The study found an additional disparity among ethnic groups. People of South Asian ethnicity accounted for 11% of those with recorded MASLD, compared with 7.2% of the wider population, but had 33% lower odds of having further assessments to check for liver scarring.

MASLD, formerly known as non-alcohol related fatty liver disease (NAFLD), is linked to metabolic conditions including obesity, type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure. For some people, it can progress to more serious liver disease, including cirrhosis and liver cancer and the need for a liver transplant.

Professor William Alazawi, Consultant Hepatologist and senior author of the study, said:

"Our analysis shows a substantial gap between recorded diagnoses and the number of people expected to have MASLD. Although recorded diagnoses have increased in the last decade, many people diagnosed may be missing out on opportunities for early intervention. Improving identification in primary care needs to go hand in hand with better assessment of those already diagnosed."

The findings highlight the challenge of identifying a condition that is both common and often asymptomatic, reinforcing the need for greater awareness and consistent case-finding in primary care.

Pamela Healy OBE, Chief Executive of Liver UK, the new name for the British Liver Trust, said:

"This study suggests that millions of people could be living with liver disease without knowing it. Because MASLD often develops silently, many people may not realise there is a problem until significant liver damage has occurred. Earlier identification gives people the opportunity to take action to improve their liver health and reduce their risk of serious complications."

Belinda Whitlock from North Lincolnshire was diagnosed with MASLD after almost two years of unexplained fatigue, nausea and abdominal pain. Her symptoms were initially attributed to menopause, and her fatty liver was only discovered incidentally during an ultrasound for another health concern; further tests showed advanced fibrosis linked to MASLD.

Her experience highlights the importance of diagnosing MASLD in time for people to understand their condition, make changes to protect their health and access appropriate support. Belinda said: "Getting a diagnosis has helped me understand what is happening with my liver and, importantly, what I can do to protect my health. Without knowing what was happening, I would never have had the opportunity to make the changes I needed to my diet and lifestyle, which have ultimately helped save my life."

The study also found that the risk of adverse outcomes was highest among people with both type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure, underlining the importance of managing MASLD alongside wider metabolic health.

Ian Rowe, President at the British Association for the Study of the Liver (BASL), said:

“MASLD needs to be addressed as part of a person’s wider health, not in isolation. People with MASLD often have other conditions such as type 2 diabetes, obesity and high blood pressure. Earlier identification and appropriate assessment of all associated conditions could help clinicians intervene before liver disease becomes more advanced.”

The research was presented at the British Association for the Study of the Liver (BASL) Annual Meeting 2026 at the ICC Wales, 7–9 October, and published in *The Lancet Regional Health – Europe*.

Abeysekera KWM, Fernandes GS, Hammerton G, et al. *Prevalence of steatosis and fibrosis in young adults in the UK: a population-based study.* *Lancet Gastroenterology & Hepatology.* 2020;5(3):295-305.

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