People in the UK fear cancer and heart disease – but overlook one of the biggest killers of working-age adults

Tuesday 14 July, 2026

****EMBARGOED UNTIL 00:01 14th July 2026****

New data released today has revealed that just 9% of people actively think about or monitor their liver health despite liver disease being one of the leading causes of premature death among working-age adults.

Liver disease is largely absent from the UK's biggest health concerns according to a major new survey published today and commissioned by Liver UK, the new charity formed by the merger of the British Liver Trust and Children's Liver Disease Foundation.

When asked to name the three health conditions they worry about most, respondents overwhelmingly identified cancer, heart disease, stroke and mental health. Liver disease barely featured, even though it caused more than 12,300 deaths across the UK in 2023 and remains one of the few major disease areas where mortality continues to rise. In addition, the latest ONS statistics show that liver disease is now the second biggest killer of people under 65 in England and Wales.

Unlike many major health conditions, liver disease disproportionately affects people before old age. Premature deaths from liver disease in England have increased by 42% since 2001, while mortality rates for many other major diseases have fallen, underlining the urgent need for greater awareness, earlier diagnosis and improved prevention.

The survey of 2,000 UK adults also revealed widespread misconceptions about liver disease. Key findings include:

- One in three (33%) wrongly believe liver disease is only caused by alcohol.
- One in five (20%) incorrectly believe babies and children cannot develop liver disease.
- More than half (56%) did not know liver disease can develop without symptoms in its early stages.
- Only around one in 20 correctly identified liver disease as one of the leading causes of death among working-age adults.

Liver disease often develops silently, meaning many people are unaware they are at risk until significant and irreversible damage has already occurred. Around three-quarters of people with liver disease are diagnosed when opportunities for effective intervention are already limited, making awareness of risk factors and earlier diagnosis critical.

The findings are published as the British Liver Trust and Children's Liver Disease Foundation come together as Liver UK, creating a stronger voice for everyone affected by liver disease and liver cancer.

Pamela Healy, Chief Executive of Liver UK, said: "The most striking thing about this survey isn't just what people got wrong. It's that liver disease barely featured at all when people were asked which health conditions worry them most.

“Yet liver disease is claiming thousands of lives across the UK every year, often in people of working age, while too many people remain unaware of the risks until the damage has already been done.

“We need the Government and the NHS to do more to prioritise prevention, early diagnosis and access to care. Too many families are facing avoidable heartbreak because liver disease is being detected too late.”

Liver UK's call for greater action on prevention and early diagnosis is rooted in the experiences of families affected by the disease.

The human impact of late diagnosis is illustrated by the experience of Sara Harding and her family. Sara Harding, whose father Stephen died aged 62, just months after being diagnosed with advanced liver disease, said: “Before my dad became ill, none of us realised how serious liver disease could be or how easily it can develop without obvious symptoms.

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"Dad had been told years earlier that he had a fatty liver, but we never imagined it could lead to the devastating outcome it did. By the time he was diagnosed with advanced liver disease, we were in a race against time.

"What we've learned is that people need to understand their risk factors, not just the symptoms. Liver disease can progress silently for years. If more people knew about conditions such as fatty liver disease and the importance of monitoring liver health, it could help prevent other families going through what we have.

"We're supporting Liver UK's call for greater awareness because earlier detection and better understanding of liver disease have the potential to save lives."

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