Urgent action needed as new research reveals gaps in fatty liver disease diagnosis and care

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New research released today to coincide with Global Fatty Liver Day has found that fatty liver disease is being consistently overlooked, leading to late diagnosis. This discovery comes from analysis of a survey of patients with fatty liver disease, which found that more than half reported receiving no support following their diagnosis, and a third were diagnosed at a late stage.

Fatty liver disease, also known as MASLD (Metabolic dysfunction-Associated Steatotic Liver Disease), is estimated to affect up to 1 in 5 people in the UK[i]. The main risk factors are being overweight, an unhealthy diet or living with type 2 diabetes.

A survey[ii]
conducted by the British Liver Trust found that among 687 people living with MASLD:

• 68% were overweight or obese

• 35% had type 2 diabetes

More than half (55%) said they had received no support with weight management, eating a healthy diet or physical activity, which is the cornerstone for successful treatment of this disease. In the early stages, reducing weight and improving diet can either halt disease progression or even reverse liver damage. Additionally, over a third of respondents said their diagnosis came at a late stage, when it was too late for effective treatment.

With an estimated two thirds of the UK population classed as overweight or obese, the charity is calling for better awareness among both the general population and healthcare professionals. The British Liver Trust is urging widespread, systematic case finding—including routine testing and liver scanning for people at risk—to enable earlier diagnosis and better outcomes. The charity also highlights the need for new treatments to be introduced alongside comprehensive education for healthcare professionals, to ensure patients receive appropriate support at the right time.

MASLD is affecting an increasing number of people across the UK. Mortality rates in England alone rose by 44%[iii]
between 2019 and 2023, with the highest rates seen in the North of England.

Pamela Healy OBE, Chief Executive at the British Liver Trust, comments:

“For too long, widespread misunderstandings around liver health have meant that large numbers of people are unaware of the risks to their liver from being overweight, or from eating too much unhealthy or ultra-processed food. People are frequently told how these lifestyle factors increase their risk of heart disease and type 2 diabetes, but the risk of fatty liver disease is rarely discussed.

“We want to see MASLD to be given the same attention as other major conditions, and we need effective changes to ensure that everyone at risk receives the right treatment at the right time.”

Sara’s father was told he had a fatty liver in 2014 and only received one scan in 2016. In 2024, he was diagnosed with MASLD and died just four months later in July 2024, aged 62. Sara and her family are still trying to come to terms with his tragic - and ultimately preventable - death: “If we’d got that MASLD diagnosis a little bit sooner, if he’d just had a few more weeks, and if he had been put under surveillance a few years earlier, they would have seen his liver was getting worse and it wouldn’t have got to this point.”

“MASLD is a growing public health concern across the UK,” said Professor Philip Newsome, a leading liver expert from King’s College Hospital London and medical advisor to the British Liver Trust. “We are seeing promising advances in research with several new treatments showing encouraging results. However, there is an urgent need to translate these developments into clinical practice, ensuring early detection and better treatments are embedded within the NHS to deliver real benefits for patients.”

[i] Modeling NAFLD disease burden in China, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Spain, United Kingdom,

and United States for the period 2016-2030 - PubMed

[ii] Patient survey 2024 - initial findings - British Liver Trust

[iii] Liver Disease Profiles - Data | Fingertips | Department of Health and Social Care

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