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The 'silent' liver disease

Heal

By Meera Murugesan

NEW research shows that drinking coffee — whether caffeinated or decaf — can help reduce the risk of liver fibrosis, liver cancer and even death from chronic liver disease.

In the face of a growing health crisis like fatty liver disease, this everyday beverage may offer some surprising protection.

But don't rush to the café to get your caffeine fix just yet. Coffee alone isn't enough to stop what experts now call Metabolic Dysfunction-Associated Steatotic Liver Disease (MASLD) — a condition that's quietly becoming one of the most widespread chronic illnesses in Malaysia and across Asia, says Subang Jaya Medical Centre (SJMC) consultant gastroenterologist Dr Ganesalingam Kanagasabai.

MASLD: THE SILENT EPIDEMIC

Previously known as non-alcoholic fatty liver disease, MASLD is a condition in which excess fat builds up in the liver, often without symptoms and it's strongly linked to other conditions like obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

Today, MASLD is recognised as the most common cause of chronic liver disease worldwide, and it's on the rise — especially in countries battling increasing rates of obesity and diabetes.

In Malaysia, this is a stark reality and the numbers are staggering. The National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) 2023 found that more than half (54.4 per cent) of Malaysian adults were overweight or obese, placing them at significant risk of MASLD.

Poor diet, physical inactivity and an alarming rate of undiagnosed chronic conditions are fuelling the rise.

"MASLD is often dubbed the silent killer as many people don't know they have it until serious damage has occurred," says Dr Ganesalingam.

By then, it may have progressed to Metabolic Dysfunction-Associated Steatohepatitis (MASH), a more severe form involving liver inflammation and scarring (fibrosis), which can lead to cirrhosis, liver failure or liver cancer.

The danger doesn't stop at the liver. MASLD is also closely tied to cardiovascular disease, chronic kidney disease, sleep apnoea, polycystic ovary syndrome, and even non-liver cancers. "In fact, most people with MASLD



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are more likely to die from heart attacks or stroke than from liver complications," shares Dr Ganesalingam.

Since MASLD often has no early symptoms, it's usually discovered during routine blood work or imaging.

The encouraging news is that MASLD, especially in its early stages, is often reversible with lifestyle changes.

Dr Ganesalingam says one of the most important interventions is weight loss. Losing at least five per cent of body weight can significantly reduce fat in the liver.

A greater weight loss — between seven and 10 per cent — can help reduce liver inflammation, and losing more than 10 per cent has been shown to improve fibrosis.

Physical activity is another critical element. Engaging in moderate-intensity exercise for at least 150 minutes per week, or 75 minutes of vigorous activity, can help lower liver fat and improve overall metabolic health.

Diet plays a major role as well. A shift toward a Mediterranean-style diet, rich in vegetables, fruits, whole grains, lean proteins, and healthy fats, can be highly beneficial.

Avoiding ultra-processed foods, sugar-sweetened beverages and foods high in saturated fats is also strongly recommended.

In addition to lifestyle changes, managing underlying risk factors, such as high blood sugar, high blood pressure

and cholesterol levels, is essential. Quitting smoking and minimising alcohol consumption also leads to better liver and heart health.

Dr Ganesalingam says for individuals with advanced MASLD or cirrhosis, regular follow-ups with a liver specialist is necessary. Some patients may eventually require a liver transplant if their liver function deteriorates significantly.

PREVENTION IS POWER

Ultimately, the most effective way to combat MASLD is prevention. By adopting a healthier lifestyle, individuals can significantly reduce their risk of developing the disease.

This means being more physically active, improving the quality of their diet, limiting sugar and processed food, maintaining a healthy weight, and managing existing health conditions.

Routine medical check-ups and early screening for liver and metabolic conditions also play a vital role.

MASLD is a growing but largely silent threat to public health. The time to act is now — through awareness, early detection and sustainable lifestyle changes.

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