

MEDIA RELEASE

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New data shows rates of liver disease high in regional Victoria

MELBOURNE: A first of its kind study published in the Medical Journal of Australia (MJA) shows liver disease looks to be Australia's next epidemic affecting at least 36% of regional Victorians¹.

The study looked at rates of Non-alcoholic Fatty Liver Disease (NAFLD) in the Goulburn Valley area and concluded the rate in this regional community was higher than the estimated rate in metropolitan areas.

Based on the Fatty Liver Index which uses pathology data combined with Body Mass Index (BMI) and other measurements, researchers found NAFLD affects 36% of people in the region, and 45% of those aged 60 or more.

Lead author, Professor Stuart Roberts, is the Head of Hepatology and a consultant gastroenterologist at The Alfred, he said; "Rates of liver disease have been based on estimates developed from overseas data and little is known of the true prevalence of fatty liver disease in Australia. The study shows that rates in regional communities are concerning, and more research is needed to discover the prevalence of the disease in metropolitan areas, which may be higher than current estimates."

This research comes after an article last year in the Journal of Gastroenterology and Hepatology that predicts NAFLD liver deaths will increase 85% from 1900 deaths in 2019 to 3500 deaths in 2030².

It is well known that excessive alcohol consumption can lead to liver damage but risk factors such as diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure or high cholesterol can also place people at higher risk.

Prof Hans Schneider is Director of Pathology at Alfred Health, he said: "Frequently patients with non-alcoholic fatty liver disease do not have symptoms. A subgroup of these patients develops non-alcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH), which can lead to severe liver disease later on. Abnormal liver function tests are one way to suspect NAFLD and patients with obesity, diabetes or high blood pressure might benefit from these tests, which are typically requested by their general practitioner."

Prof Roberts noted that health behaviours such as increased alcohol consumption, reduced exercise and dietary changes during periods of lockdown could have a negative impact on liver health, making community awareness a key factor in fighting the disease.

Prof Roberts said; "Fatty liver and even cirrhosis can be reversed if caught in time. The pathology markers are important here because they can help patients to see the improvement they are making in their test results, even with just a few kilos of weight loss.

If left unchecked, fatty liver can lead to liver cirrhosis, and cardiovascular disease and is associated with solid organ cancers, particularly primary liver cancer."

A report from the Liver Foundation shows that liver cancer is the fastest growing cause of cancer-related deaths in Australia, and in 2019-20 the disease cost Australians \$4.8bn³.

Richard Wylie, CEO of the Liver Foundation said; "Fatty liver disease, while not currently top of mind in the community, is on track to become the next frontier in the lifestyle diseases

chronic health war. In some ways we've become complacent about the trajectory of obesity related diseases such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes, however fatty liver disease and its direct links to cirrhosis and liver cancer may well be the tipping point the community needs to start taking their overall lifestyle more seriously.”

NAFLD usually has no symptoms in the early stages, and for those who do experience symptoms these can be non-specific such as general fatigue or weight loss.

Fatty liver disease occurs when the liver is generating an excessive amount of fat and so fat builds up in the liver. It can cause the liver to become inflamed (known as steatohepatitis) and over time this can cause scarring of the liver known as cirrhosis. Cirrhosis causes liver failure and can lead to cancer.

The first step for a diagnosis is a group of pathology tests known as Liver Function Tests (LFTs) that look for biomarkers in the blood that show if the liver is functioning well.

Patients may also be referred for further evaluation with non-invasive assessment such as Fibroscan and in some cases liver biopsy may be needed, in which a sample of liver tissue is taken through the skin with a needle. This is then examined by a pathologist under a microscope to look for evidence of damage to the liver.

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References

1. <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2021/215/2/prevalence-non-alcoholic-fatty-liver-disease-regional-victoria-prospective>
2. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jgh.15009>
3. <https://www.liver.org.au/deloittereport>

About Pathology Awareness Australia

Pathology Awareness Australia is a not-for-profit company formed to improve understanding and recognition of Australia's world class pathology services. Pathology Awareness Australia runs the Know Pathology Know Healthcare initiative <http://knowpathology.com.au/> which aims to educate Australians about pathology tests and how they are vital in diagnosis, monitoring and guiding treatment for diseases.

Pathology informs an estimated 70% of medical decisions and diagnoses 100% of cancers.