Fatty Liver Disease Is on the Rise, Especially Among Younger Adults

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Results from a self-contained community study in the Midwest recently revealed that the incidence of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) has significantly increased over the past decade, especially among younger adults. Further, the chronic condition has been linked to a significantly increased risk for diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and cardiovascular disease, Healio reports.

For the study, researchers identified 3,869 patients with NAFLD and 15,209 age- and sex-matched controls living in Minnesota for a population-based epidemiological study. They found that the incidence of NAFLD, an obesity-related liver disease, rose from 62 per 100,000 person years in 1997 up to 329 per 100,000 person-years in 2014—an increase of more than 400 percent.

Study authors noted that individuals ages 18 to 39 had the highest incremental increase of all the population groups examined, with NAFLD cases among young adults increasing from 20 to 140 per 100,000 person-years over the course of the study. For people ages 40 to 59, NAFLD rates went up from 70 to 407 per 100,000 person-years, and those over 60 saw an increase from 125 to 515 per 100,000 person-years.

Compared with those in the control group, patients with NAFLD were also twice as likely to develop one of three common comorbidities of fatty liver disease: diabetes, high blood pressure and dyslipidemia (high cholesterol). What's more, the patients with NAFLD and no comorbidities still had a twofold increased risk for cardiovascular events and also had a doubled mortality risk compared with the study's control group.

Overall, study authors wrote that the life span of people living with fatty liver disease is up to four years shorter than those who don't without the condition and that the majority of those remaining years are often spent in states of metabolic distress. The study calls for further research into the links between NAFLD and incident comorbidities so that doctors can better learn how to prevent them.