When the Liver Strangles the Heart

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On the cover of the latest issue of Hepatology is a graphic illustration of the liver squeezing a heart. It is an artist's rendition of cirrhotic cardiomyopathy in end stage liver disease. The figure reminds us that the cirrhotic liver can restrict the ability of the heart to function properly.

Although the topic of this illustration has more to do with a post-transplant condition, I think it is a graphic image of the relationship between the liver and the heart when fatty liver disease sets in. Perhaps in that situation, a more accurate picture would be monstrous fatty hands squeezing both the liver, the heart, the vascular system and all the vital organs. Fatty liver disease is nasty and it is squeezing the life out of Americans.

Here we are in the holidays, when overindulgence is the norm. But if you want to protect your liver and heart and brain, it's best to keep overindulgence to a minimum. However, don't deprive yourself. Deprivation tends to trigger more overindulgence. Instead, choose your food wisely.

Here are some tips to help you stay on track during the holidays:

- Be sure you sleep 8 hours every night. When we are tired, we are more likely to overeat or eat sugar or comfort foods.
- Exercise every day. Try to be active throughout the day. Don't sit for more than an hour without getting up and stretching, perhaps take a short walk around the room if the weather is bad. (I strolled outside in the middle of writing this.)
- Drink lots of water, especially before a meal or party to help tamp down your appetite.
- Make vegetables dominate your plate and choose as many colors as possible.
- Consume fruit and whole grains in moderate amounts.
- Eat plant-based or lean protein choices, such as eggs, nonfat yogurt or milk, beans, nuts, fish and poultry.
- Be sure your diet is rich in fiber.
- Choose healthy fats, such as canola and olive oil.

- Reduce sodium intake. Avoid processed foods, which are often high in sodium and other additives.
- Don’t overdo it. A serving of nuts is healthy; a can of nuts is not.
- Avoid alcohol but don’t let this stop you from having fun.
- Include small amounts of your favorite foods. Eating is a pleasure, so be sure to include small amounts of food you enjoy.

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