

Obesity epidemic results in NAFLD becoming most common cause of liver disease in Europe

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Obesity epidemic results in Non-Alcoholic Fatty Liver Disease (NAFLD) becoming the most common cause of liver disease in Europe. World's leading experts gather in Seville to discuss the fastest growing health epidemic in Europe now affecting 1 in 4 people. Credit: EASL

Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease prevalence in Europe is a preventable epidemic, leading researchers will report at the EASL Non-Alcoholic Fatty Liver Disease (NAFLD) Summit 2019 taking place this week in Seville, Spain.

More than half of adults and one third of children in Europe are classified as overweight or obese, with the highest proportion coming from lower socio-economic groups where NAFLD is prevalent.

NAFLD is the accumulation of excess fat in the [liver](#), and is now the most common cause of liver disease in Western countries due to the rapid rise in levels of obesity and type 2 diabetes. It is a major European health burden resulting in liver cirrhosis and liver cancer, as well as big increases in cardiovascular disease and non-liver cancers.

Lack of physical activity and excess calorie intake leads to weight gain and fat deposition, which play a major role in the development and progression of NAFLD.

"We have reached a tipping point with obesity and NAFLD and swift action is urgently needed by [policy makers](#) to reverse the growing epidemic. Obesity is the normal response to an abnormal environment and can only be tackled by addressing the multiple physical, social and economic obesogenic drivers in society." said Philip N. Newsome, Secretary General of the European Association for the Study of Liver Disease (EASL) and also Director of the Centre for Liver and Gastrointestinal Research & Professor of Hepatology at the University of Birmingham.

There is an acute need to improve the diagnostic tools for NAFLD, and EASL is actively supporting several such research projects.

"Meanwhile we need to educate healthcare professionals how to make

early diagnoses and implement interventions that can prevent progression to a more advanced disease. We also need to empower patients so they know what steps they can take to reduce their own risk."

"It is clear that many of the causes of NAFLD—sedentary behavior, excessive energy intake and a poor diet are avoidable. If we are to reduce the incidence of obesity and NAFLD we need to have a significant re-think about the regulations regarding the sale and marketing of sugar products," concludes Newsome.

Sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) are one of the largest sources of added sugar with little, if any, nutritional value. Consequently, consumption of SSBs is now one of the leading causes of childhood and adult obesity and is associated with NAFLD and increased liver damage.

EASL has been strongly advocating for the introduction of fiscal measures to discourage the consumption of SSBs and for legislation to ensure that the [food industry](#) improves the labeling and composition of processed foods.

Helena Cortez-Pinto, EASL EU Policy Councillor and Professor at the Faculty of Medicine in Lisbon:

"Across the WHO European Region children are regularly exposed to marketing that promotes foods and drinks high in energy, saturated fats, trans-fatty acids, added sugar or salt. Food and beverage advertisements, and in particular those embedded in children's TV programs, electronic and social media, have been shown to drive consumption of high-calorie and low-nutrient beverages and foods. EASL has argued that public health policy needs to include restrictions on the advertising and marketing to children of SSBs and industrially processed foods high in saturated fat, sugar and salt."

Researchers at the NAFLD Summit will also hear about solutions that include promoting a better diet and physical activity. EASL's annual International Liver Congress™ taking place in London 15-19 April 2020 will have as its theme "A healthy liver for a healthy you."

"Healthy eating is an important step in the right direction, but this needs to be supported by fiscal measures from governments to encourage behavioral change."

"The Mediterranean Diet, characterized by a high intake of olive oil, nuts, fruits, vegetables and fish, and a low intake of red and processed meat and added sugar, is an effective solution and one that is beneficial in the treatment and also in the prevention of NAFLD," concludes Prof. Cortez-Pinto.

Provided by European Association for the Study of the Liver

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