The liver disease crisis

Liver disease is on the rise. Since 1970, deaths due to liver disease have increased by 400%. Every day, over 40 people die from liver disease in the UK. This is in stark contrast to other major killer diseases, such as heart disease and cancer, in which the number of deaths have either remained stable or decreased. Shockingly, liver disease is the biggest cause of death in those aged between 35-49 years old.

- Liver disease is the third leading cause of premature death in the UK
- 90% of liver disease is preventable
- Three quarters of people are currently diagnosed at a late stage when it is too late for lifestyle changes or intervention.

The rise in deaths from liver disease compared with other major diseases

Liver disease is now the biggest cause of death in those aged between 35-49 years old

Top five causes of death by age, England and Wales 2017 – proportion of deaths in age group
Most people with liver disease die aged between 18 to 65 years. This makes liver disease the third biggest cause of premature death in working age, with 62,000 years of working life lost every year.

63% of UK adults are now classed as obese and overweight, and it’s estimated that 1 in 3 have early-stage non-alcohol related fatty liver disease (NAFLD).

Despite there being good evidence to show that losing 10% of body weight improves liver function in those with NAFLD/NASH, there is a reluctance amongst some GPs to discuss weight with their patients.

Experts predict that over the next decade, NAFLD will become the leading cause of end-stage liver disease and liver transplantation.

5% of adults in the UK have NASH, which is the more advanced form of NAFLD where the liver already has some scarring.

Liver cancer is the fastest rising cause of cancer death in the UK.

Only 12% of people diagnosed with primary liver cancer survive for more than five years.

Cases of primary liver cancer, the most common of which is hepatocellular carcinoma, have risen by almost two-thirds (63%) over the last decade, making it the ninth most common cause of cancer deaths.

Around 1000 liver transplants are performed each year. There are 350 people on the liver transplant list at any one time.

180,000 people are chronically infected with hepatitis B and 215,000 are estimated to carry the hepatitis C virus.

Between 40-50% of those with viral hepatitis are thought to be undiagnosed. 90% of hepatitis C cases are linked to drug misuse.

Only 5% of British adults say their liver would be of ‘great concern’ if they discovered they had a problem with it (versus 72% for a heart problem).

Executive summary: statistics at a glance

90% of liver disease in the UK is due to alcohol, obesity and viral hepatitis and is therefore preventable.

Alcohol-related liver disease accounts for 60% of all liver disease.

Around 7700 people die from alcohol-related liver disease each year.

There are around 6000 cases of primary liver cancer diagnosed each year – around 16 people per day. The vast majority of these people will have underlying advanced liver disease.

People who live in more deprived areas are up to six times more likely to die from alcohol-related liver disease than those who live in wealthier areas.

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Liver disease – who it affects

Liver disease is expected to overtake heart disease as the biggest cause of premature death in the next few years. It is the only major cause of death, including heart disease and cancer, on the increase in the UK.

The risk of damage to the liver from alcohol and obesity combined is what is known as ‘super-additive’ – that is, far greater than simply doubling the effect of either one or the other.

Symptoms of liver disease

Liver disease is a silent killer. It does not usually have any symptoms in the early stages. It can take up to 20 years for liver disease to progress to a stage where symptoms start to show.

Symptoms of later stage liver disease can include:

- Jaundice
- Fatigue
- Swollen abdomen
- Weight loss / loss of appetite
- Abdominal pain

75% of those with liver disease are diagnosed in a hospital or emergency setting, when the disease is already well-advanced. By this time, treatment options are limited.

The British Liver Trust is the leading UK charity for people with liver disease. We are transforming liver health through:

- increasing awareness of liver disease
- campaigning for earlier detection and better treatment
- working in partnership to drive up standards of care and encourage more research
- providing information and support to those affected

For references please see the full report on our website: The alarming impact of liver disease in the UK

www.britishlivertrust.org.uk