

Ultra-Processed Food Raises Likelihood of Fatty Liver Disease

For both adolescents and adults, body mass index and waist circumference were linked to greater risk of MASLD.

January 2, 2024 By Sukanya Charuchandra

In both adolescents and adults, eating more ultra-processed food was linked to an increased risk of developing [metabolic dysfunction-associated steatotic liver disease \(MASLD\)](#), according to study results presented at the [AASLD Liver Meeting](#).

MASLD, [the new name](#) for non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD), and its more severe form, metabolic dysfunction-associated steatohepatitis (MASH, formerly known as non-alcoholic steatohepatitis, or NASH), are responsible for a growing proportion of advanced liver disease worldwide. The buildup of fat in the liver can lead to inflammation, fibrosis, [cirrhosis](#) and even [liver cancer](#). With no effective approved medical therapies, disease management is dependent on lifestyle changes such as weight loss and exercise. MASLD is often associated with obesity and type 2 diabetes, but how ultra-processed food affects the development of fatty liver disease is not fully understood.

Longgang Zhao, PhD, a postdoctoral researcher at Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School, and colleagues carried out a study that included 806 adolescents and 2,734 adults from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (2017–2018).

The researchers assessed the consumption of ultra-processed food with the help of dietary data collected over two full days. MASLD was assessed using transient elastography imaging (FibroScan). Adolescents ate an average of 812 grams of ultra-processed food each day, while adults ate 823 grams. Some 12% of the adolescents and 36% the of adults had MASLD.

For both adolescents and adults, higher consumption of ultra-processed food was linked to a greater risk of MASLD. This association was largely dependent on having a higher body mass index and a larger waist circumference. The researchers also found a positive link between more ultra-processed food consumption and higher levels of albumin and C-reactive protein (a biomarker of inflammation) in adults.

“Higher ultra-processed food intake was associated with higher odds of having [MASLD] among both adolescents and adults. These associations are largely mediated by elevated body fatness,”

the researchers concluded. “Further prospective studies are needed to confirm our findings. If confirmed, reducing ultra-processed food intake might help prevent [MASLD] in both adolescents and adults.”

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