Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease - Prevalence and natural history of NAFLD
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Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) affects 15% to 40% of the general adult population and is the most common cause of abnormal liver biochemistry worldwide.1,2 Once thought to be a benign disease, NAFLD and its active form nonalcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH) are now believed to be the leading cause of cryptogenic cirrhosis and cryptogenic hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC).3-5 In USA, NASH has already become the third leading indication for liver transplantation and the second most common etiology of HCC in the transplantation list.6,7

Only a few studies have reported the incidence of NAFLD in the general population, 8-10 but most of these previous studies assessed hepatic fat using abdominal ultrasonography. In a recently large population-based prospective study using state-of-the-art non-invasive tests of hepatic fat and fibrosis, we found that 13.5% of the Hong Kong Chinese adults developed incident fatty liver in 3-5 years.11. Incident NAFLD rarely leads to advanced fibrosis in the intermediate time frame. Metabolic syndrome and its individual components are strongly associated with incident fatty liver.