

Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease - Prevalence and natural history of NAFLD

Grace Lai-Hung Wong

Faculty of Medicine, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

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.