You may be hurting your liver — and not know it

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If you think you're overworked, consider your liver.



Roughly the size and shape of a football and located in your upper right abdomen — just above your stomach and right kidney — the liver performs over 500 (yes, 500!) critical functions. Chief among these are filtering toxins, alcohol, and medications from your blood; producing bile that aids digestion by breaking down fats in the small intestine; and storing vitamins, minerals, and glucose, which it releases into the bloodstream as needed.

So dependable and resilient is the liver that it's the only organ capable of repairing and regenerating itself when damaged or partially removed.

And yet, it has its limits. "Generally, maintaining an unhealthy lifestyle has a direct impact on your liver," says Dr. Angelo B. Lozada of Makati Medical Center (MakatiMed). "But ingesting certain substances that aren't necessarily toxic can also harm the liver. And like many diseases deemed 'silent killers' because they present symptoms only at an advanced stage, liver damage tends to go unnoticed since it shares symptoms with less lifethreatening conditions."

While some causes of liver damage are obvious, others may come as a surprise:

• Alcohol is certainly top of mind when it comes to liver health. "But you don't even have to consume it in excess," points out Dr. Lozada. "As little as four ounces of hard liquor can scar your liver, eventually leading to cirrhosis — a condition in which scar tissue replaces healthy liver tissue, impeding blood flow to the organ. When this happens, the liver cannot function properly."

Occasional moderate drinking may be considered safe, but to better protect your liver, consider replacing alcohol with healthier alternatives. "Drinking water helps the liver flush out toxins," he adds.

• Painkillers bring instant relief from migraines, fever, or muscle aches. "Make sure you follow the dosage recommended by your healthcare provider," says Dr. Lozada. "While over-the-counter painkillers, like paracetamol (acetaminophen), aspirin, ibuprofen, and naproxen sodium, are safe and effective when taken properly, excessive use can harm the liver."

• Supplements may address nutrient deficiencies, boost athletic performance, and enhance overall well-being. But despite being labeled as "natural," some supplements can damage both the kidneys and the liver.

"High doses of vitamin A, for instance, are not good for the liver. It's best to get it from whole foods like salmon, leafy green vegetables, and orange and yellow produce," explains Dr. Lozada.

• Obesity doesn't just increase your risk for heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, and certain cancers. It can also lead to fatty liver disease — the buildup of excess fat in the liver.

"Nonalcoholic fatty liver disease is often a consequence of being overweight, especially when fat accumulates around your midsection, having type 2 diabetes, and living a sedentary lifestyle," says Dr. Lozada. "Address it by cutting sugary foods and trans fats from your diet, exercising regularly, and working toward your ideal weight."

• Smoking isn't just harmful to your lungs and heart. The numerous toxic substances in a single cigarette force the liver to work overtime, causing oxidative stress that can progress to cirrhosis. Additionally, chemicals in cigarette smoke are carcinogenic, increasing your risk of liver cancer.

"There is nothing beneficial about smoking cigarettes or vaping," says Dr. Lozada. "Quit today."