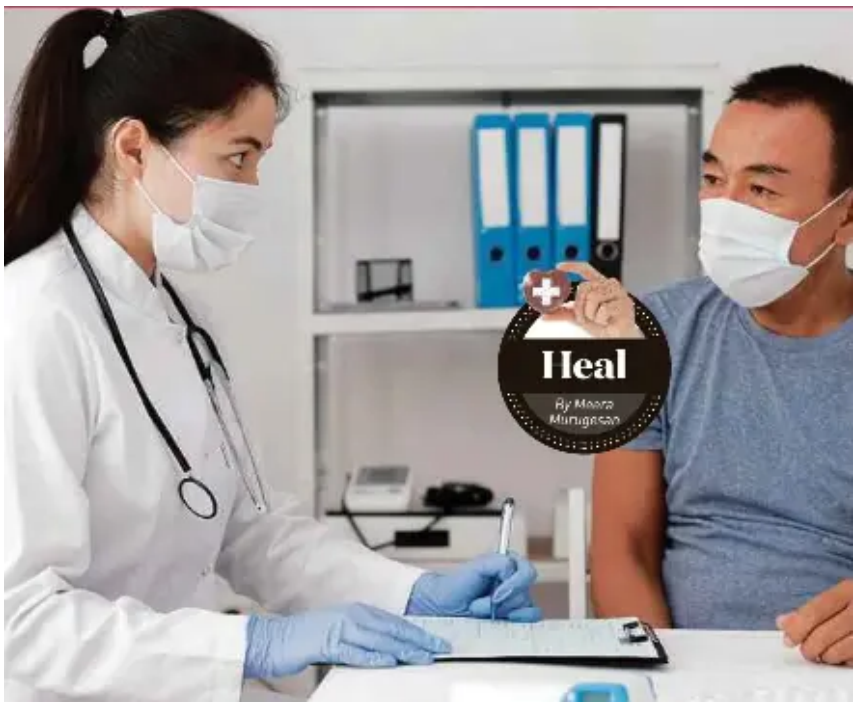
Poor liver health impacts wellbeing

New Straits Times · 14 May 2025 · 13 · meera@nst.com.my

THE liver is a hard-working organ that plays an essential role in digestion, detoxification, immunity and metabolism. In fact, a healthy, well-functioning liver is the foundation for good health and there are consequences when the liver is unable to act as it should.



IMU University family medicine specialist Dr Chow Suet Yin says much has been said about the liver being the only organ that is capable of self-regeneration, and while that's good news, there are limits to what it can handle.

"Unhealthy lifestyle habits are the leading cause of poor liver health and liver disease," she adds.

The main culprits are excessive alcohol intake; diets that are high in saturated fat, sugar and processed food; obesity, which is related to diet and lack of exercise — and the impact of certain medications, supplements and traditional or herbal remedies.

STAGES OF LIVER DISEASE

While early symptoms of liver disease are non-specific, more obvious signs appear as its condition deteriorates.

"Fatty liver is the initial stage of liver disease and it is not associated with any symptoms; only a scan will reveal the fat deposits that have built up in the liver. This progresses to inflammation and subsequently scarring — by this time, you may have symptoms such as fatigue and abdominal pain that comes and goes," says Dr Chow.

Without intervention, scar tissue will build up from the liver's ongoing attempts to heal itself, advancing to fibrosis. At this stage, liver functions are impacted, leading to more severe symptoms, such as abdominal pain from an enlarged liver or fluid buildup in the abdomen.

The next stage of liver disease is known as cirrhosis, in which the damage to the liver and its blood vessels becomes irreversible.

“When the liver becomes cirrhotic, you are likely to have symptoms such as jaundice and find yourself more prone to bruising or bleeding. As liver functions continue to worsen, you may even vomit blood and experience confusion or weakness.”

Moving forward, the damaged cells can become cancerous, leading to liver cancer, or progress to liver failure.

LOVE YOUR LIVER

As liver damage has its roots in unhealthy lifestyle habits, the key to turning things around is to adopt healthier habits, says Dr Chow.

Eat more good fats from sources like olive oil, avocado, fatty fish, seeds and nuts; consume salt and sugar in moderation; and cut back on processed foods, saturated fats and substances like alcohol.

For those who are overweight, a five to 10 per cent reduction in weight can reverse a fatty liver and don’t forget to get adequate sleep as the liver works hardest while we are at rest.

Dr Chow also advises caution with supplements and traditional remedies, as these may have an impact on liver functions.

In addition, an annual screening to help monitor liver health and allow early intervention is crucial.