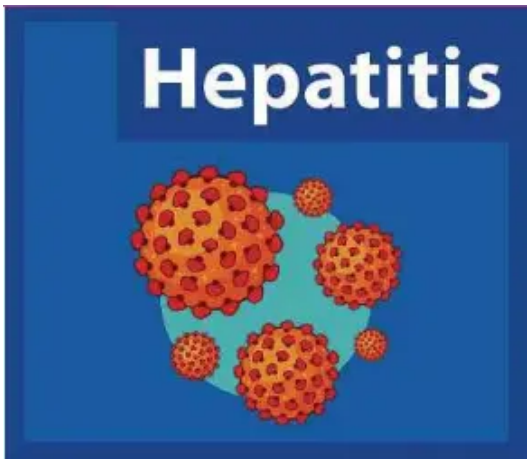
Silent liver disease

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THE liver is often called the “silent organ” because liver disease can develop quietly over many years without causing obvious symptoms. Unlike many other organs in the body, the liver has an extraordinary ability to compensate for injury and continue performing its essential functions despite ongoing damage.



As a result, many people with chronic liver disease feel perfectly healthy and continue with their daily lives, unaware that inflammation and scarring are slowly progressing inside their liver.

In fact, for patients with chronic hepatitis B or C, it is not uncommon to remain symptom-free for 20 to 30 years, says Pantai Hospital Ipoh resident consultant physician, gastroenterologist and hepatologist Dr Lim Chee Sang.

Unfortunately, by the time warning signs such as jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes), abdominal swelling, vomiting blood or confusion appear, the liver has often sustained irreversible damage.

“This is why liver disease is frequently diagnosed only when complications such as liver cirrhosis or liver cancer have already developed.”

Unlike the skin or stomach, the liver contains relatively few pain-sensitive nerves. Furthermore, it possesses an impressive ability to regenerate itself after injury.

Even when a considerable portion of the liver is damaged, the remaining healthy liver tissue can continue to function adequately. As a result of these unique characteristics, liver disease often progresses silently.

Patients may not experience pain or any noticeable symptoms until more than half of the liver has been affected. Dr Lim Chee Sang

“Patients may not experience pain or any noticeable symptoms until more than half of the liver has been affected,” says Dr Lim.

One of the greatest challenges in liver medicine is that most patients with chronic hepatitis B or hepatitis C feel completely well, he adds.

As a result, many mistakenly believe that if they have no symptoms, they must be healthy. Unfortunately, this is not always true.

The viruses continue to multiply quietly inside the liver, causing chronic inflammation. Over many years, this persistent inflammation gradually replaces healthy liver tissue with scar tissue, a process known as fibrosis. As fibrosis worsens, it eventually progresses to cirrhosis, where the liver becomes permanently
scarred and loses its ability to function normally.

Dr Lim says throughout this entire process, patients may notice nothing more than occasional tiredness or reduced energy, symptoms that are often attributed to work stress, ageing, or lack of sleep.

Others discover they have hepatitis only after a routine medical check-up, screening during blood donation, pre-employment medical examination or pregnancy screening.

Worldwide, hepatitis B and C remain among the leading causes of liver-related deaths. Fortunately, effective antiviral medications can suppress hepatitis B and cure hepatitis C in the vast majority of patients.

Dr Lim adds that modern lifestyles have led to a dramatic increase in obesity and diabetes. Many people now develop metabolic dysfunction-associated steatotic liver disease (MASLD). Some patients progress to metabolic dysfunction-associated steatohepatitis (MASH), where ongoing inflammation leads to liver fibrosis, cirrhosis, and liver cancer.