Obesity Can Cause Liver Damage in Children as Young as Eight

As kids get heavier, doctors are increasingly seeing pediatric cases of fatty liver disease.

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As the United States continues to see rates of childhood obesity rise, doctors are warning that the extra pounds kids are packing on could be increasing their risk for fatty liver disease. In fact, recent studies show that obesity can damage the livers of children as young as 8 years old, Newsweek reports.

Conducted at Columbia University Medical Center in New York City, the study is the first of its kind to show that weight gain can have a negative impact on the liver in young children. The report, published in the Journal of Pediatrics, is especially troubling for doctors, who say kids increasingly appear to be developing non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) as a result of their obesity.

NAFLD occurs when excess fat builds up in the liver, triggering inflammation that can damage the organ. It is the most chronic liver disease found in American children. If left untreated, the condition can cause liver cirrhosis, liver failure and, sometimes, cancer.

For the study, researchers measured blood levels of the liver enzyme ALT (a marker for liver damage) in 635 children between ages 3 and 8 enrolled in Project Viva, an ongoing study of women and children's health in Massachusetts. Almost a quarter of the kids assessed had ALT in their blood. Children with larger waist circumferences at age 3 and others who matched obesity markers were significantly likely to be among them.

The findings build on growing evidence that shows that fatty liver disease can and is developing in adolescents and young adults. The study also underscores the importance of intervening early in children's lives to prevent excess weight gain and promote liver health.

Right now, the best way for both kids and adults to combat NAFLD is to lose weight, eat healthy and get regular exercise. However, researchers are investigating pharmaceutical ways to prevent and treat the disease.