

Ultra-Processed Food Raises Likelihood of Fatty Liver Disease

For both adolescents and adults, body mass index and waist circumference were linked to greater risk of MASLD.

January 2, 2024 By [Sukanya Charuchandra](#)

In both adolescents and adults, eating more ultra-processed food was linked to an increased risk of developing [metabolic dysfunction-associated steatotic liver disease \(MASLD\)](#), according to study results presented at the [AASLD Liver Meeting](#).

MASLD, [the new name](#) for non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD), and its more severe form, metabolic dysfunction-associated steatohepatitis (MASH, formerly known as non-alcoholic steatohepatitis, or NASH), are responsible for a growing proportion of advanced liver disease worldwide. The buildup of fat in the liver can lead to inflammation, fibrosis, [cirrhosis](#) and even [liver cancer](#). With no effective approved medical therapies, disease management is dependent on lifestyle changes such as weight loss and exercise. MASLD is often associated with obesity and type 2 diabetes, but how ultra-processed food affects the development of fatty liver disease is not fully understood.

Longgang Zhao, PhD, a postdoctoral researcher at Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School, and colleagues carried out a study that included 806 adolescents and 2,734 adults from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (2017–2018).

The researchers assessed the consumption of ultra-processed food with the help of dietary data collected over two full days. MASLD was assessed using transient elastography imaging (FibroScan). Adolescents ate an average of 812 grams of ultra-processed food each day, while adults ate 823 grams. Some 12% of the adolescents and 36% the of adults had MASLD.

For both adolescents and adults, higher consumption of ultra-processed food was linked to a greater risk of MASLD. This association was largely dependent on having a higher body mass index and a larger waist circumference. The researchers also found a positive link between more ultra-processed food consumption and higher levels of albumin and C-reactive protein (a biomarker of inflammation) in adults.

“Higher ultra-processed food intake was associated with higher odds of having [MASLD] among both adolescents and adults. These associations are largely mediated by elevated body fatness,”

the researchers concluded. “Further prospective studies are needed to confirm our findings. If confirmed, reducing ultra-processed food intake might help prevent [MASLD] in both adolescents and adults.”

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