

# LIVER IT UP

**Nina Agrawal** on habits to adopt and eschew to keep this powerful organ in shape

**T**he liver filters our blood, helps maintain sugar levels, stores energy and plays an essential role in digestion. A poor diet, lack of exercise and medical conditions can contribute to liver disease and liver cancer, both of which are on the rise globally. It's often possible to prevent liver disease, or even reverse it, with diet and lifestyle changes alone.

Here's what can help, as well as which habits might be causing harm.

## The Worst Habits

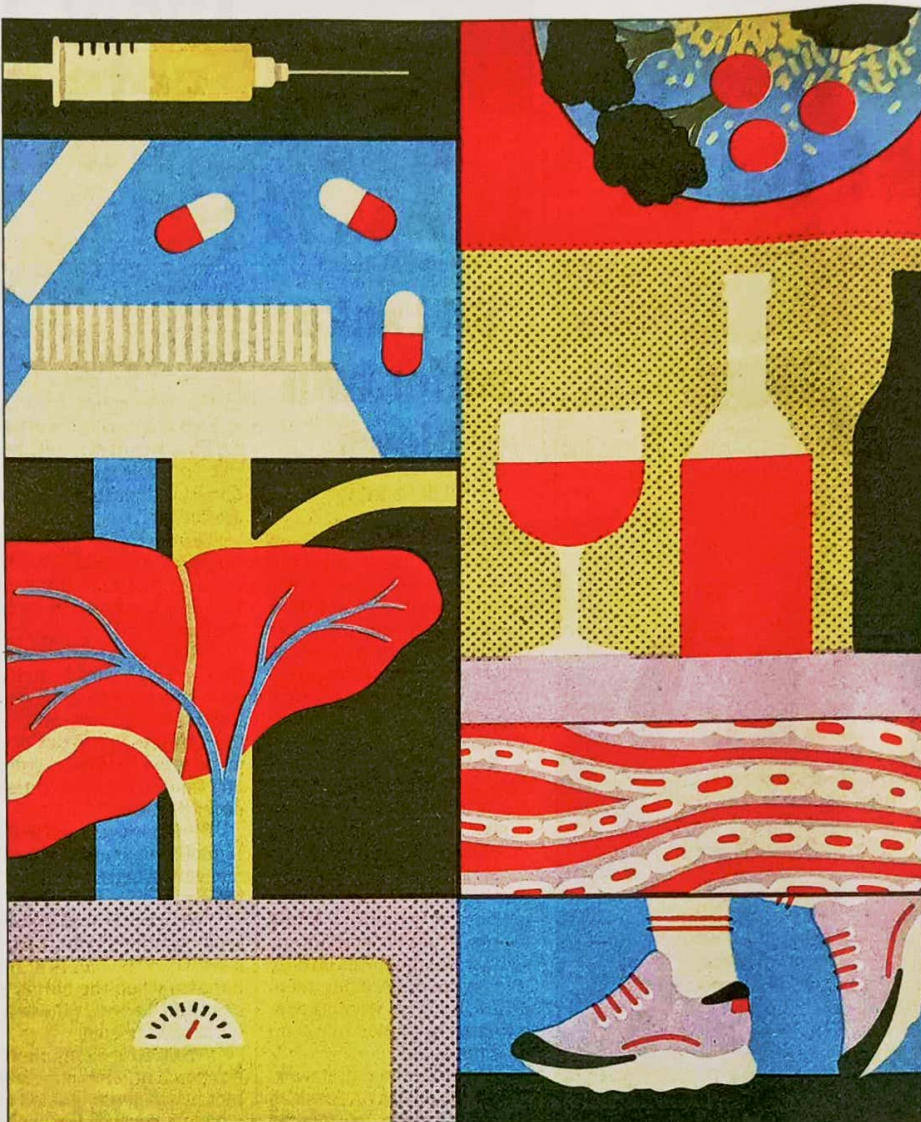
**Too much alcohol:** Regular alcohol consumption, metabolic dysfunction or a combination of both can contribute to something called steatotic liver disease. Fat accumulates in the liver and can lead to inflammation, scarring and cirrhosis, said Dr. Zobair Younossi, chair of the Global Center for Liver Outcomes & Policy Research at Georgetown University School of Medicine, US.

In people with metabolic issues like type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure or excess abdominal fat, modest alcohol consumption can compound liver damage, Dr. Younossi said. Binge drinking (which is defined as consuming five or more drinks on one occasion) is the most harmful.

For people with advanced liver disease, doctors recommend avoiding alcohol altogether. But with milder or no disease, up to one drink per day may be acceptable, though none is better, said Dr. Mary Rinella, director of metabolic and fatty liver disease at the University of Chicago, US.

**Overdoing sugar:** Sugar is a building block for fat formation in the liver. With too much of it, "the machinery gets overwhelmed", and liver cells become stressed, Dr. Rinella said. Insulin resistance, which can occur with chronic overconsumption of sugar, also contributes to fat buildup in the liver.

There's a wealth of evidence linking high sugar consumption, particularly from



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sugary beverages, to metabolic dysfunction-associated steatotic liver disease or MASLD, said Shira Zelber-Sagi, a clinical dietitian and public health researcher at the University of Haifa in Israel.

Added sugars like high fructose corn syrup — which are present in many ultraprocessed foods as well as sodas — are particularly damaging to the liver. Zelber-Sagi tells patients they can have the occasional slice of cake, but they should absolutely avoid sweetened drinks.

## Relying on supplements:

Dawn Anderson, a clinical dietitian at Virginia Commonwealth University, US, said patients often ask her about liver cleanses, detoxes and supplements like milk thistle and mushroom coffee. There is little evidence that these have any liver benefits, experts said. "Your liver is already your body's detoxification system. It does not need a cleanse," Anderson said. And these products may cause harm if they contain unknown ingredients or excessive quantities of certain ingredients.

## The Best Habits

**Exercise and healthy weight:** Losing weight can help reduce fat buildup, inflammation and scarring in the liver. Just a 3 per cent reduction in body weight can improve liver health markers, but 10 per cent or more is needed to reverse scarring.

GLP-1 drugs like Wegovy, which are approved to treat an advanced type of MASLD, have been "a game-changer", Zelber-Sagi said. But they must be used in conjunction with exercise, particularly strength training, because muscle loss

can worsen outcomes in people with MASLD.

Engaging in at least 150 minutes of aerobic activity and strength training twice a week, helps reduce abdominal fat and insulin resistance.

## Mediterranean-style diet:

The Mediterranean diet, which centres on fresh fruits, vegetables, fish and legumes and is rich in healthy fats, has been shown to reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease, a leading cause of death in people with non-alcoholic liver disease. It is low in saturated fats — found in red meat, dairy and palm oil — which can increase fat in the liver.

But it's not always practical to stick strictly to the diet. Anderson said that while many of her patients follow a traditional Southern diet, they can incorporate Mediterranean elements. "We can have collard greens, cabbage, maybe a summer squash, a cucumber and onion salad," she said. For protein, she suggests adding fish or white meat and cutting back on fatty cuts of red meat. She also encourages people to grill rather than fry, and to use butter only for flavouring.

Lastly, coffee (up to four cups a day) has been shown in animal studies to reduce fat and scar formation in the liver, and is associated in humans with a lower risk of cirrhosis, Dr. Rinella said.

**Primary care:** Hepatitis B and hepatitis C are significant drivers of liver disease worldwide. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend that all adults be screened at least once for hepatitis B and hepatitis C. Both can be treated. Adults should also be vaccinated against hepatitis B if they weren't as babies, Dr. Rinella said.

Primary care doctors can do these screenings. They can also estimate your liver disease risk with the help of routine lab results. If you have type 2 diabetes, you should talk to your doctor about getting liver stiffness testing, which can show progressing liver disease.

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