

CT Children's CLASP Guideline Family Handout

Metabolic Dysfunction-Associated Steatotic Liver Disease (MASLD)

FAMILY HANDOUT: ABOUT STEATOTIC LIVER DISEASE

What is steatotic liver disease (SLD)?

SLD or "fatty liver" is an obesity-related liver disease. It starts when fat builds up inside the liver, and over time, too much fat stays in the liver. It can be mild or severe. In mild cases, children have fat in their liver. In more severe cases, the fat is combined with liver damage (inflammation) which can lead to scar tissue (fibrosis) and, eventually, cirrhosis.

Who gets SLD? What are the risk factors for developing SLD?

Fatty liver disease is the most common liver disease in children. Obese children are at greatest risk for developing fatty liver disease. Most children are diagnosed in their early teenage years, but it has been diagnosed in children as young as 8 or 9 years old. It occurs more frequently in children with Hispanic, Asian or Caucasian heritage, and is slightly more common in boys.

What are the symptoms and how does my doctor diagnose it?

Children with fatty liver disease do not have any symptoms. On exam, children are usually obese in the waist area, they may have an enlarged liver, and dark discoloration of the neck or armpits (called acanthosis nigricans which is a sign of insulin resistance), or the exam may be completely normal. During a routine well-child check-up, the pediatrician may order blood tests to look for elevated liver enzymes, pre-diabetes, and high cholesterol. If the liver enzymes are elevated your child may be sent to a liver specialist (hepatologist) for further testing. Sometimes your pediatrician may order an abdominal ultrasound to look for fatty changes in the liver before sending your child to the hepatologist.

Can SLD cause health problems in children and adolescents?

SLD can cause serious damage of the liver with progression from inflammation to cirrhosis. There is also the potential for the development of liver cancer.

How do you treat SLD?

Weight loss is the only proven way to treat fatty liver disease. There is no medication to treat this disease. SLD should be managed with gradual weight loss through a combination of exercise and dietary changes. You can work with your pediatrician and a dietician to make these lifestyle changes.

