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PRESS RELEASE

Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease – an underestimated danger

Liver and heart disorders are becoming increasingly common and are affecting ever younger patients

(Vienna, 20th October 2008). Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease is among the most severe, and at the same time most underrated liver diseases. It promotes liver cirrhosis and worsens cardiovascular disease. "Unfortunately patients and many doctors don't take this disease anywhere near seriously enough," complained liver specialist Professor Vlad Ratziu. He and other well-known experts presented their work on diagnosis, prevention and treatment at the 16thUnited European Gastroenterology Week (UEGW) in Vienna, the largest European congress of its kind.

When liver damage due to fat build-up is diagnosed, alcohol misuse is not always responsible. Professor Vlad Ratziu of the Hôpital Pitié-Salpêtrière in Paris/France estimated that 20 to 30 per cent of the population suffers from non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD). It is often associated with overweight and diabetes. The blood sugar level is increased because the body's cells no longer respond sufficiently to insulin. "Nonalcoholic fatty liver plays an important part in the development of the metabolic syndrome," explained Professor Herbert Tilg of Innsbruck Medical University. "This combination of overweight, high blood pressure, diabetes and disturbances of fat metabolism brings a marked increase in the risk of cardiovascular disease."

Not a trivial disorder

At the same time the risk of liver cirrhosis increases. According to Professor Tilg the preliminary stage develops in around 30 to 50 per cent of all patients diagnosed as having non-alcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH). These patients exhibit inflammation of the liver cells followed by fibrosis involving outgrowth of connective tissue into the liver. In about one sixth of these patients the fibrosis develops into liver cirrhosis.

A fatty liver usually causes no, or only minor, symptoms. This means that it often goes undetected or is found just by chance. Even when liver function test results are elevated, doctors often do not take them seriously once they have excluded alcohol misuse as a possible cause. The consequences of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease are still frequently underrated by those who are not specialists in liver disorders. A major aim of the United European Gastroenterology Federation (UEGF) is to raise consciousness of this problem among both patients and doctors.

Cause: unhealthy lifestyle

"Because obesity and diabetes are increasing in the populations of industrialised countries, and the number of children with fatty liver is also rising, we have to expect that in the future ever more and ever younger people will contract cirrhosis as a consequence of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease," said Professor Ratziu. Faulty nutrition and lack of exercise are often at the root of this alarming development.

It is therefore important that diagnostic methods allow large groups of people to be quickly and easily screened. Up to now only a biopsy provides reliable information. The aim is to replace this complicated method, which is unpleasant for the patient, with minimally invasive diagnostic techniques. Scientists are also searching for specific marker molecules which could make it possible to detect inflammation of the liver by means of a blood test, for example. This would allow at-risk patients to be detected in time. They would then have a chance to change their lifestyle and so avoid severe liver or heart disease. However, in the experience of hepatologists, only limited numbers of patients are prepared to take more exercise and change their dietary habits.

New treatments on the horizon

This makes progress in treatment all the more important. "Several industry-sponsored therapeutic trials are now underway in our center, specifically designed to improve the liver condition in this disease. Active research on new compounds and therapeutic targets looks very promising," said Professor Ratziu. Research on adiponectin is raising hopes. This hormone of fat cells helps to bind insulin to the body's cells and thus to normalise the blood sugar level. "Our laboratory findings show that adiponectin also acts to inhibit inflammation and that amounts are markedly reduced in obesity," said Professor Tilg. "These are important starting points for future treatment". Research into the causes also faces unsolved questions as not all of those with fatty liver also become ill. It is not yet clear what conditions cause the liver cells to become inflamed. "An important role may be played by a misdirection of gut microorganism colonisation, which changes the intestinal flora and leads to chronic inflammation in the intestine and potentially the liver," said Professor Tilg. Hepatologists believe that joint international research efforts over the next three to five years will lead to new diagnosis and treatment methods.

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