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Study Finds 43.7% of Chinese Adults in Community Sample Have Steatotic Liver Disease

Researchers examining 25,736 adults said metabolic dysfunction and heavy alcohol use were the leading drivers of chronic liver disease.

Monday, October 5, 2026



A large community study in China has found that steatotic liver disease is common among adults living outside hospital settings, with researchers also identifying heavy alcohol use and metabolic problems as key factors linked to chronic liver disease.

The findings were highlighted Monday in Nature Reviews Gastroenterology & Hepatology, which reported on results from the CHESS-LiverHealth initiative, a prospective cohort study designed to measure how widespread liver fibrosis and steatotic liver disease are in China. The underlying results were published in The Lancet Gastroenterology & Hepatology.

Researchers enrolled 29,023 adults across 18 locations in China. After exclusions, the analysis included 25,736 community-dwelling adults with a median age of 51. Participants were assessed with vibration-controlled transient elastography, a noninvasive test used to estimate liver stiffness and detect fat in the liver.

Among those included in the analysis, 4.4% had a liver stiffness measurement of at least 8 kPa, a level used in the study as an indicator linked to liver fibrosis. The reported 95% confidence interval for that estimate was 4.2% to 4.7%. The prevalence of steatotic liver disease was much higher, at 43.7%, with a 95% confidence interval of 43.1% to 44.3%.

The researchers also reported estimates for subtypes of steatotic liver disease, including metabolic dysfunction-associated steatotic liver disease, according to the Nature Reviews summary. The report said the analysis of risk factors pointed to a primary role for metabolic dysfunction and alcohol consumption in chronic liver disease.

The data are notable because they come from a broad community sample rather than from patients already seeking care for liver problems. That makes the results useful for estimating how common these conditions may be in the general adult population. It also adds to evidence that liver disease can be widespread even outside specialist clinics and hospitals.

Steatotic liver disease refers to a buildup of fat in the liver. In many cases it is tied to obesity, diabetes and other metabolic conditions, while in others alcohol use can be an important driver. Fibrosis, which involves scarring of the liver, can progress over time

and lead to more serious illness if it is not identified and managed.

The CHESS-LiverHealth project was set up to address a basic public health question: how much chronic liver disease is present in the community, and what factors appear to be driving it. China has a large and aging population, and metabolic disorders have become more common in recent years. Against that background, the combination of a high rate of steatotic liver disease and a measurable burden of likely fibrosis is likely to draw attention from clinicians and health officials.

The study, as described in the Nature Reviews article, used baseline cross-sectional data from a prospective cohort. That means the reported figures show prevalence at the start of the project rather than changes over time or proof that one factor directly caused disease in a given person. Even so, the size of the sample and the use of a standardized liver assessment tool strengthen the value of the findings for public health planning.

The results may also matter beyond hospitals and public agencies. Companies involved in beer, wine, spirits and other alcoholic beverages are likely to be watching research like this closely, because it can shape prevention campaigns, product messaging and broader debates about responsible drinking. The study does not assign industry consequences, but it adds to the body of evidence that high-risk alcohol use remains an important liver health concern alongside metabolic disease.

For doctors and health systems, the findings may support wider screening or earlier risk assessment in people with obesity, diabetes or heavy alcohol use. For policymakers, the numbers may add urgency to efforts aimed at reducing preventable liver disease through nutrition, weight management and alcohol harm reduction. For the public, the figures offer a reminder that chronic liver disease can remain silent for long periods and still be common in the community.

Nature Reviews Gastroenterology & Hepatology said the CHESS-LiverHealth initiative is intended to establish the prevalence of liver fibrosis and steatotic liver disease in China. The report was published on Oct. 5, and it cited the original Lancet Gastroenterology & Hepatology paper by Liu and colleagues.