

My 22-year-old son has fatty liver. What kinds of foods should he avoid?

Nonalcoholic fatty liver, a disease closely linked to the obesity crisis, is a strong risk factor for heart disease and Type 2 diabetes, and in severe cases it can lead to liver failure. There are no official dietary guidelines for its treatment, but whether certain foods might fuel the disease is a subject that is drawing increasing attention from scientists.

Researchers have proposed a number of dietary factors — trans fats, omega-6 oils, fried foods and fructose, to name a few — as culprits. But the one that has attracted perhaps the most attention is sugar, in part because it is metabolized in the liver and it is known to increase blood levels of triglycerides, a type of fat.

Studies suggest that sugar consumption contributes to liver fat accumulation. And there is some data indicating that people who carry genetic variants associated

with fatty liver are particularly sensitive to increased fat accumulation in response to sugar and refined carbohydrates.

One of the first pieces of dietary advice that clinicians who treat fatty liver give to their patients is to stay away from sugary drinks. But doctors say that patients with the disease are typically consuming too many calories of all kinds, not just sugar.

Often, patients are told to avoid heavily processed foods, which are easy to consume in large quantities and usually stripped of their fiber and other naturally occurring nutrients. Preliminary studies have found so far that fatty liver patients respond well to the Mediterranean diet, which includes plenty of fresh produce, nuts, olive oil, poultry and fish.

Right now, the only proven method of reducing fat in the liver is weight loss. In the clinic, doctors tell fatty liver patients to aim for an initial weight loss of at least 10 percent of their body weight by limiting junk food and exercising regularly. ANAHAD O'CONNOR