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Before joining The British Liver Trust, Vanessa worked as a freelance communications professional for a variety of clients across the public, private and voluntary sectors. She spent 10 years at the British Diabetic Association, where she repositioned diabetes as a serious health condition. Her work culminated in managing the communications function and leading the rebrand and name change to Diabetes UK.

THE SILENT KILLER: LIVER DISEASE AWARE

Liver disease is a major healthcare crisis that we must all do something about. Mortality rates have increased 400% since 1970, and it is now the third leading cause of premature death in the UK.

With Love Your Liver Week taking place this month (13th to 17th June), Vanessa from the British Liver Trust gives an overview of the facts and nutritional management of the 'Silent Killer'.

Liver disease is often called the 'Silent Killer' as most signs and symptoms show only when damage is advanced and often irreversible. However, with earlier diagnosis and awareness of the main causes - alcohol, obesity and viral hepatitis - lives can be saved.

The British Liver Trust exists to support patients and families living with liver disease and provides award-winning information and leaflets. Crucially, we also work to improve awareness, prevention and early detection.

This year, we have been successful in our application to work in partnership with the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) in making liver disease a clinical priority for the next three years for the UK's primary health care professionals and practice staff. We will be producing a range of materials to help those working in primary care to increase the number of patients who are detected with liver disease at an early stage and receive appropriate treatment.

LIVER DISEASE: THE FACTS

Your liver performs over 500 vital functions, including breaking food down and turning it into energy, helping the body get rid of waste, removing harmful substances and fighting infection. Here are some of the key facts:

- At least one in five of the UK population is at risk of developing

liver disease - that's more than 12 million of us (CMO 2013).

- Deaths from liver disease increased by 40% from 2001 to 2012.
- Liver disease will potentially be Britain's biggest killer within a generation.
- Liver disease is currently the UK's third largest cause of premature death.
- 25% of the population is now categorised as obese; most will have fatty liver disease and many will have inflammation and scarring that can lead to cirrhosis and liver cancer.

These shocking statistics are something we all must take heed of because liver disease will affect all of us, whether that is ourselves or someone close living with or dying from a liver condition. Some liver conditions are genetic or caused by autoimmune malfunctions, but 90% of liver disease is preventable and it is vital that we are all aware of the risk factors and main causes. These are:

- drinking too much alcohol, too often
- being overweight
- being infected with viral hepatitis

These are all things we can do something about to reduce our risk of developing liver disease. The earliest possible diagnosis and best possible care is vital for everyone affected.

Andrew Langford, Chief Executive of the British Liver Trust explains: "Although the liver is remarkably resilient and can regenerate if given time to recover, by the time most people have signs and symptoms of liver damage, it is often irreversible. Three quarters of

people already have end stage liver disease when they are first diagnosed - by this time for many it is too late."

Good nutrition supports the liver to function and helps to keep us all healthy. Eating a good, balanced diet to maintain strength and a healthy weight is essential for people with liver problems.

Some liver diseases are linked to being overweight; 90% of morbidly obese individuals are thought to have fatty livers. Obesity can also speed the damage associated with other conditions such as alcohol-related liver disease and can decrease the effectiveness of treatments for hepatitis C. It is, therefore, important to maintain a healthy weight, but it is also important for those working in the diet and nutrition industries to be aware of the fact that patients who are overweight are more at risk and may need to be tested to see if they have a problems with their liver.

For people who are diagnosed with advanced liver disease and are experiencing symptoms such as fluid retention in the abdomen, their weight may be affected and BMI results can be misleading. In this instance, their diet will need to be managed very carefully by a dietitian with experience of managing liver disease, as it is possible to be overweight as a result of the fluid retention, whilst also to be malnourished.

The damage caused by liver disease can also affect the liver's ability to store and release glycogen, causing fatigue. If you go for long periods of time between meals, the body will start to use its own muscle tissue, or fat, to provide energy, which can lead to malnutrition, muscle wasting and weakness.

Patients with liver disease may experience symptoms such as nausea, low energy levels, fluid retention in the legs, or accumulation of fluid in the abdomen (ascites). In these cases, patients will need to follow a more specialised diet. They may also become ill, lose a lot of weight and may not feel like eating. Eating and keeping to a well-balanced diet may be difficult in these circumstances and the patient may need specific advice on how to increase calories and protein intake.

These, and other problems associated with liver disease, require specialist dietary advice tailored to the individual from a registered dietitian.

IS COFFEE BENEFICIAL?

There is a growing body of evidence that suggests drinking moderate amounts of coffee can reduce your chance of developing liver disease and can also limit the rate at which liver disease progresses. The British Liver Trust is calling for more clinical research in this area. Although it appears that drinking coffee is beneficial, it is far more important to keep to a healthy weight and not drink too much alcohol.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LIVE WITH LIVER DISEASE?

The British Liver Trust is contacted every day by people affected by liver disease. Real people and their stories bring to life the reality of living with the condition and the devastating effect it can have on their everyday lives and their families.

A wife whose husband passed away with Non-Alcoholic Steatohepatitis (NASH) told the Trust: "In late 2013, my husband was given the terrible news that he had cirrhosis of the liver. He was not a drinker and as a Greek Cypriot he ate a well-balanced good Mediterranean diet. He was given no treatment and our GP did not really understand the situation. He had not been able to eat for months, lost a lot of weight. Eventually, on Boxing Day 2013, I got him into A&E and within four hours he saw a Liver Specialist and was admitted to hospital.

"Unfortunately, he did not respond to the treatments available and after suffering, but still wanting to live and managing to 'cope', he eventually died on 5th August 2014 from NASH. This disease needs more done to expose it. Liver disease is always associated with drinkers and, therefore, gets neglected; more should be done to tell people that children and non-drinkers also can suffer from it."

A young woman with Autoimmune hepatitis (AIH) said: "I am not going to lie, it's not easy being giving this diagnosis and it's not easy to tell people how you feel, as AIH is not visible. A disease that isn't visible to people usually means it's not that bad (in people's heads). I have bad days, where I just want to sleep, my whole body aches and I don't want to see anyone, but my loud and happy personality usually takes over and I quickly snap out of it and just carry on. I am slowly learning to live with AIH (and all that

comes with it) and I found some great advice from the British Liver Trust.”

You can read more stories from people affected on the British Liver Trust’s website: www.britishlivertrust.org.uk

THE BRITISH LIVER TRUST

The British Liver Trust is a charity that strives to:

- raise public liver health awareness through our Love Your Liver campaign and promote lifestyle choices that could prevent liver disease developing;
- campaign on behalf of people affected by liver disease, to push for early diagnosis, better treatment, more research and to get improved liver health services recognised as a top priority;
- be the first port of call for anyone seeking information about liver disease, whether this be patients and their families, GPs and healthcare professionals, politicians or the media;
- provide support services for patients and families through our patient support groups, website, social media services, online support forum ‘HealthUnlocked’ and our helpline;
- improve awareness, prevention and early detection.

WHAT CAN YOU DO AND WHAT ADVICE CAN YOU GIVE OTHERS?

Firstly, be aware of your own liver health - complete our Love Your Liver health screener (www.loveyourliver.org.uk) and read the analysis of your health risks and what to do if you are at risk of liver disease. And then share the screener with your colleagues, friends and family so that they can do the same.

For those wanting to decrease their alcohol intake and take the two-three days off alcohol that we recommend, our app www.spruceapp.co.uk provides daily support and encouragement to minimise the damage that alcohol does to our health.

The British Liver Trust has a range of publications covering specific areas of liver disease which are helpful. Use the Trust’s website (www.britishlivertrust.org.uk) to find out more about the liver, what liver diseases there are, the research that’s being done and what the British Liver Trust is doing to fight the ever-increasing

epidemic of liver disease in the UK.

Please consider how you can support the work we do by fundraising events, regular contributions etc, and by encouraging your employer to choose the British Liver Trust as its nominated charity.

The third week in June is Love Your Liver week. More information on how you can support the Trust can be found at www.britishlivertrust.org.uk/support-us/.

THE LOVE YOUR LIVER CAMPAIGN



‘Love Your Liver’ is a British Liver Trust national awareness campaign that aims to raise awareness of three simple steps to maintain good liver health and reduce your risks of developing liver problems:

STEP 1: KEEP TO A HEALTHY WEIGHT

Love Your Liver by making sure you have a healthy diet, plenty of water to drink and regular exercise.

STEP 2: REDUCE THE AMOUNT OF ALCOHOL YOU DRINK

As a nation, we are drinking far more than our parents did. Too much alcohol can cause serious and lasting damage. The British Liver Trust recommends having two to three days each week without drinking. It’s an easy message, but a very effective way of reducing the amount you drink, giving your liver a rest and making it easier to stick within the Government guidelines of 14 units a week.

STEP 3: KNOW AND AVOID THE RISKS FOR VIRAL HEPATITIS

Blood-borne viruses such as hepatitis A, B and C can cause permanent liver damage and increase the risk of liver cancer. Avoid these viruses by never sharing personal items like toothbrushes, razors, nail scissors or tweezers, drug equipment and by practising safer sex. If you get a tattoo, make sure it is in a licensed parlour. If you think you may have been at risk in the past - even if it was a long time ago - ask your doctor for a test.

Visit our online screener to see if you are at risk: <http://loveyourliver.org.uk/love-your-liver-health-screener/>