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# Alarming rise in liver disease

Private hospital sets up centre focusing on its treatment.

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THE liver is the second largest organ in the body and performs hundreds of complex functions such as fighting infections, removing toxins from the body, helping the blood clot and releasing bile. Unfortunately, liver disease usually does not come with any obvious symptoms until it is fairly advanced and there is already liver damage.

"You can be infected with a hepatitis virus and be a carrier for many years without showing any symptoms," said Malaysian Liver Foundation (MLF) president and Prince Court Medical Centre (PCMC) consultant hepatologist and internal medicine specialist Tan Sri Dr Mohamed Ismail Merican.

According to him, a worrying 60% of Malaysians are at risk of dying due to fatty liver, a fairly new disease that is more common in those who are overweight or obese.

"It also affects those who have normal weight but have associated diseases such as high blood

pressure, high blood sugar and high cholesterol levels.

"The alarming rate of fatty liver disease in Malaysia is a cause for concern as it will eventually lead to liver damage, cancer and even liver failure," said PCMC consultant general, hepatobiliary and transplant surgeon Datuk Dr Harjit Singh.

Although liver disease is typically linked with alcohol and drugs, there are a host of other factors that cause it such as infections including Hepatitis A, B and C; immune system abnormalities such as primary biliary cirrhosis; cancer of the liver or bile duct and genetic liver disease such as hemochromatosis (also known as Wilson's Disease).

Dr Ismail said the different types of hepatitis come with symptoms such as fever and jaundice but do not lead to chronic liver disease.

"Hepatitis B is transmitted through blood products and body fluids by sharing needles, through sex or from mother to baby.



**Latest equipment:** Dr Mahathir listening to a briefing by Olympus Gastroenterology & Respiratory Sales Medical Systems Business Division assistant manager Hendrix Lim (right) on the Endoscopic Video Imaging Systems machine. Among those looking on are Prince Court Medical Centre board of directors chairman Datin Yap Siew Bee (centre, in pant suit) after the launch of the Liver Centre.

"Some patients experience a short illness and then recover while for others, it becomes chronic. Most liver cancer cases are associated with Hepatitis B. The good news is there is a vaccine for it," he said.

In a move to eradicate hepatitis B, it has been Malaysia's national policy to vaccinate all newborns against hepatitis B since 1989.

"Hepatitis C, a disease that was only discovered in 1988 to 1989, is transmitted by blood through sharing needles," said Dr Ismail, adding that for some, it was a short-lived infection but for others it could lead to chronic liver disease and cancer as well.

At the moment, there is no vaccination or universal cure for Hepatitis C.

"There is medication available but it only works on some patients under specific circumstances and is very expensive.

"We are working on a more affordable drug with the Drugs for Neglected Diseases initiative (DNDi), but that will take some time. Hepatitis C is also usually asymptomatic and for this reason is usually only discovered when it is at an advanced stage. The only symptom is fatigue but it doesn't manifest in every patient," said Dr Ismail.

Given the increasing number of

cases of liver disease in Malaysia, PCMC recently launched its Liver Centre Services - an event officiated by Malaysia Liver Foundation patron Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

During the launch, PCMC organised talks on liver health and also provided 100 complimentary blood screenings to attendees.

To promote awareness, several exhibitors such as Sanofi-Aventis, Blackmores, Avro Medical Sdn Bhd, Fibrosan, Enerflax and Malaysian Liver Foundation also set up booths to showcase liver disease-related medicines and equipment.