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NON-ALCOHOLIC FATTY LIVER DISEASE IN YOUNG ADULTS – WORRYING ETHNIC DIFFERENCES IN A MULTI-RACIAL ASIAN POPULATION IN MALAYSIA

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Objective
To study the prevalence of NAFLD among young adults in Malaysia and to determine whether the prevalence of NAFLD is different among young adults of different ethnic origin.

Methodology
This was a cross-sectional study on a young Malaysian population. Demographic and anthropometric data and relevant clinical and laboratory data were obtained using a standard protocol. Diagnosis of NAFLD was by trans-abdominal ultrasonography and following exclusion of significant alcohol intake and other causes of chronic liver disease.

Results
Data for 472 subjects were analyzed (mean age 23.2 ± 2.4 years old; 40.5 % men). The racial distribution was: Chinese 53.6 %, Malay 30.3 %, Indian 15.5 % and others 0.6 %. The prevalence of NAFLD was 8.1 % (38/472). Subjects with NAFLD were older, had greater BMI and WC, and recorded higher SBP and DBP. They had higher FBS, serum TG and LDL levels and lower serum HDL level. Serum ALP, ALT, AST and GGT levels were higher in subjects with NAFLD. All subjects who had NAFLD had insulin resistance. The prevalence of NAFLD was significantly higher among males compared to females (17.9 % vs. 3.3 %, p < 0.001). Highest prevalence of NAFLD was seen among Indian and Malay males at 33.3 % and 25.0 %, respectively. The prevalence of NAFLD among Chinese males was 6.8 %. Independent factors associated with NAFLD were: age, male gender, obesity and elevated serum ALT level.

Conclusion
High prevalence of NAFLD among Indian and Malay males is observed as early as young adulthood and is consistent with the higher prevalence of obesity in these groups.