

# Association of Non-Alcoholic Fatty Liver Disease and Chronic Kidney Disease in Egyptian Patients

## Original Article

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) is considered an important global and public disease affecting millions of people worldwide. In contrast, the concept of chronic kidney disease (CKD) is still evolving from being a common consequence of different diseases into a spectrum of serious complications affecting multiple body organs. A surge of hypotheses and studies suggesting a possible link between NAFLD and CKD are currently emerging as an interesting area in the research field. Both CKD and NAFLD are considered serious disorders leading to many complications and leading to high economic burdens across the globe.

**Aim of the Work:** This study aimed at assessing the association between CKD and NAFLD in Egyptian patients.

**Results:** Our study reported a highly significant statistical difference among NAFLD and non-NAFLD groups as regard CKD stages, although a non-significant difference was reported between study groups as regard estimated glomerular filtration rate (eGFR). Also, a statistically significant difference was shown between both groups as regard obesity and hypertension, in addition to a highly significant difference as regard metabolic syndrome (MetS). In contrast, there was a non-significant statistical difference between both groups as regard the development of diabetes mellitus (DM).

**Conclusion:** NAFLD, together with different co-morbid conditions, is associated with the possibility of development of CKD. We recommend careful assessment of NAFLD patients, especially those with co-existing comorbidities, for the development of CKD. Future studies should focus on the possible risk factors, etiological mechanisms and potential therapeutic targets for both NAFLD and CKD in a co-morbid situation.

**Key Words:** Chronic kidney disease, CKD, glomerular filtration rate, non-alcoholic fatty liver disease, NAFLD.

**Received:** 11 February 2025, **Accepted:** 2 March 2025.

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**ISSN:** 2735-3540, Vol. 76, No. 2, June 2025.

## INTRODUCTION

CKD was generally defined as gradual decline in renal function for at least three months which is evidenced through a decline in glomerular filtration rate (eGFR). It is considered a serious consequence of many diseases that is associated with a high economic burden of dialysis, morbidity, mortality, and poor quality of life<sup>[1]</sup>.

NAFLD is considered a general term covering a wide spectrum of chronic liver diseases including simple hepatic steatosis, steatohepatitis, liver fibrosis, liver cirrhosis, and hepatocellular carcinoma. NAFLD and non-alcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH) are considered common

manifestations of MetS, which in turn is considered a significant etiology for a wide spectrum of co-morbidities, including hypertension, DM, CKD, as well as increased risk of malignancy<sup>[2]</sup>.

Recently, evidence have shown that CKD & NAFLD share many different etiopathogenic mechanisms and may have a complex mutual relationship<sup>[3]</sup>. Moreover, many studies have shown that NAFLD prevalence was found to be higher in CKD patients, including an Egyptian study which reported that 56% of CKD non-diabetic patients on regular hemodialysis, in addition to CKD pre-dialysis patients were diagnosed as NAFLD patients<sup>[4]</sup>. These observations further suggest that CKD patients with manifestations of MetS should routinely undergo screening for NAFLD<sup>[5]</sup>.

## AIM OF THE WORK

The current study aimed at assessing the association between CKD & NAFLD in Egyptian patients.

## PATIENTS AND METHODS

This was a cross-sectional retrospective study conducted on CKD patients at the outpatient clinics and inpatient wards of Ain Shams university hospitals, Cairo, Egypt.

Assessment of GFR was done using the Modification of Diet in Renal Disease (MDRD) equation. CKD was defined as eGFR  $<60 \text{ mL/min/1.73 m}^2$  and/or urinary albumin-creatinine ratio (ACR)  $\geq 3 \text{ mg/mmol}$ . Recent guidelines from Kidney Disease Improving Global Outcomes (KDIGO) consensus were used to define CKD stages as follows: stage 1: ACR  $\geq 3 \text{ mg/mmol}$  with eGFR  $\geq 90 \text{ mL/min/1.73 m}^2$ , stage 2: ACR  $\geq 3 \text{ mg/mmol}$  with eGFR of  $60\text{--}89 \text{ mL/min/1.73 m}^2$ , stage 3: eGFR of  $30\text{--}59 \text{ mL/min/1.73 m}^2$  (with or without ACR  $\geq 3 \text{ mg/mmol}$ ), stage 4: eGFR of  $15\text{--}29 \text{ mL/min/1.73 m}^2$ , and stage 5: eGFR  $<15 \text{ mL/min/1.73 m}^2$  [6].

Patients with missing creatinine data, inadequate imaging, HBV or HCV co-infection, alcohol intake, and patients with incomplete laboratory or clinical information were not included in the study. All data of included subjects was revised in detail as regard demographic and anthropometric data including BMI and blood pressure, in addition to clinical and laboratory data.

NAFLD was diagnosed through pelvi-abdominal ultrasound based on detection of at least two of the following findings: a. Increased echogenicity of the liver parenchyma as compared to the spleen or kidney parenchyma; b. Attenuation of ultrasound beam; c. Poorly visualized intrahepatic structures [6].

Non-invasive methods were used to assess liver fibrosis severity:

- The NAFLD Fibrosis Score (NFS): The upper and lower cut-off values for NFS were  $-1.455$  and  $0.676$ , respectively [7].
- APRI Score: APRI score cut-off values were  $\leq 0.5$  and  $>1.5$  [8].

## RESULTS

This study included 160 CKD patients, including 126 males (78.8%) and 34 females (21.2%) with ages ranging from 20 to 70 years (mean  $54.56$  years), a mean BMI of  $25.53 \pm 2.52 \text{ kg/m}^2$  and a mean waist circumference of  $90.06 \pm 7.94 \text{ cm}$ .

The current study showed there were 79 (49.4%) cases with NAFLD and 81 (50.6%) cases without NAFLD. Among the non-NAFLD group, the majority (64.2%) had grade I CKD, followed by grade II (27.2%) and grade III (8.6%). On the other hand, among the NAFLD group, grade I CKD accounted for 21.5% of cases, grade II 41.8% and grade III 36.7%. Moreover, there were 78 (48.8%) cases with hypertension, 37 (23.1%) cases were DM, 28 (17.5%) cases with MetS, and 6 (3.8%) cases with obesity.

The eGFR in this study ranged from 11 to 95 (mean  $57.59 \pm 28.07$ ), the mean BUN was  $106.18 \pm 17.40$ , the mean creatinine was  $6.43 \pm 1.55$  and the mean uric acid was  $3.69 \pm 0.56$ .

As regard FIB-4 score, it ranged from 0.22 to 7 (mean  $1.89 \pm 1.78$ ) and the NFS scores ranged from  $-3$  to  $0.15$  (mean  $-1.65 \pm 1.12$ ).

There was a non-significant statistical difference among both study groups regarding age, but there was a highly significant statistical difference between both groups as regard BMI and waist circumference.

Additionally, the results showed a highly significant statistical difference among both study groups as regard CKD stages, and a significant statistical difference as regard obesity and hypertension.

As regard renal functions, there was a non-significant statistical difference among both groups as regard eGFR, BUN, and serum creatinine, while there was highly significant statistical difference as regard urinary ACR and uric acid.

## DISCUSSION

CKD is now considered as a significant global disease leading to higher risk of cardiovascular morbidity and mortality, in addition to increased risk of hospitalization and dialysis. Several studies have shown a prevalence of CKD to be approximately 13% in the adult population. However, recently, there has been a dramatic worldwide increase in the prevalence of end-stage renal disease (ESRD) due to improved quality of medical care in addition to availability of different dialysis techniques. Many studies reported a rise in the numbers of ESRD patients on chronic dialysis in the past thirty years [9]. As a result, preventive plans against CKD is urgently needed to reduce the rise in numbers of ESRD patients, with subsequent economic burdens, and significant effects on quality of life.

CKD is now considered as a prominent risk factor for ESRD, as well as for cardiovascular disease, even during early stages of decline in renal function [10]. Hence, identification of different CKD risk factors is urgently needed for adequate prevention of its development

and further progression, early diagnosis, and prompt management.

In addition to CKD, NAFLD is now considered to be one of the most common chronic liver diseases, representing a significant health problem worldwide, affecting the quality of lives of millions of people around the globe. It has been estimated that 20-30% of the general population worldwide suffer from NAFLD<sup>[11]</sup>.

NAFLD is considered a general term covering a wide range of chronic hepatic conditions, ranging from simple hepatic steatosis, NASH, liver fibrosis and cirrhosis, in addition to the risk for hepatocellular carcinoma. In addition, NAFLD is also considered as a significant risk factor for cardiovascular disease. Moreover, NAFLD is known to be closely linked to obesity and is considered an important component of MetS in the liver<sup>[12]</sup>.

MetS different components including hypertension, dyslipidemia, DM, as well as obesity are also considered important risk factors leading to possible development and further progression of CKD. The possibility of presence of an interlink between NAFLD and CKD has recently been an interesting research focus point since NAFLD is frequently accompanied by different CKD risk factors, including insulin resistance, type 2 DM, truncal obesity, and MetS. Moreover, it was found that NAFLD can in itself possibly increase the incidence of CKD<sup>[13]</sup>. There are no enough studies to elucidate whether the link between NAFLD and CKD is mediated through common risk factors and etiopathological mechanisms, or whether NAFLD can by itself contribute to increasing CKD risk<sup>[14]</sup>. Thus, this study aimed at assessing the prevalence and possible association of NAFLD and CKD in Egyptian patients.

This was a retrospective cross-sectional study that was conducted on CKD patients at our institution inpatient wards and outpatient clinics. In the current study, out of 160 cases with CKD, 79 (49.4%) had NAFLD, while 81 (50.6%) didn't. Among the non-NAFLD group, the majority (64.2%) had grade I CKD, followed by grade II (27.2%) and grade III (8.6%). On the other hand, among the NAFLD group, grade I CKD accounted for 21.5% of cases, grade II 41.8% and grade III was 36.7%. These previous results disclosed that NAFLD was associated with more advanced stage of renal affection, raising the possibility for an interlink between the two conditions.

These results agree with a previous work by *Cao et al.* who aimed to evaluate the possible association between different comorbidities occurring with NAFLD together with the risk for CKD and abnormal albuminuria. Moreover, several recent studies have reported that the prevalence of CKD in NAFLD patients ranged from 4-42%<sup>[15,16]</sup>. Also, a recent cross-sectional study including 37,825 cases showed that CKD accounted for 17.5% of NAFLD patients in Taiwanese health check-up centers<sup>[17]</sup>.

The present study showed a highly significant statistical difference among both study groups as regard BMI and waist circumference, which agrees with the recent work of Akahane and his colleagues<sup>[14]</sup>. This is also in harmony with *Cao et al.* who reported that, male patients with higher BMI and waist circumference were more likely to develop NAFLD than those with no such risk factors<sup>[7]</sup>.

The current study also reported a highly significant statistical difference among both study groups as regard CKD stages. This is similar to a study by *Cao et al.* who reported a higher prevalence and progression of CKD in NAFLD patients than in those without NAFLD<sup>[7]</sup>.

In a similar context, a recent meta-analysis by Musso and colleagues, which included 28,680 individuals from 11 studies have reported that NAFLD was associated with a highly increased risk of incident CKD<sup>[3]</sup>. Moreover, another updated meta-analysis that included 9 studies with 96,595 adult individuals, of whom 34.1% had NAFLD, reported an increased incidence of CKD in NAFLD patients, and the study results showed that the risk for developing CKD increased with more advanced NAFLD or liver fibrosis<sup>[18]</sup>. Another recent meta-analysis including 1,222,032 individuals, of whom 28.1% had NAFLD, in addition to 33,840 CKD patients with CKD stage 3 or above over a median follow-up period of 9.7 years indicated that NAFLD was associated with about 1.45-fold increased long-term risk of incident CKD stage 3 or above, and the risk seems to be positively correlated with NAFLD severity<sup>[19]</sup>.

As regard NAFLD and DM, a previous study by *Targher et al.*, in addition to other studies, have showed that 40% of NAFLD patients with DM developed CKD<sup>[20,21]</sup>. Furthermore, another study by *Zhao et al.* who focused on the interlink between CKD & NAFLD in type 2 diabetic patients, have reported that type 2 DM and NAFLD were higher in CKD versus non-CKD patients<sup>[22]</sup>.

Recently, several recent studies have reported the potential effects of NAFLD on the incidence and development of cardiovascular events (CVEs), increased mortality risk, in addition to progression of kidney disease in CKD patients<sup>[23-25]</sup>.

Adipokines have also been a potential target for research, where several recent studies have showed their possible role in both NAFLD and CKD. Similarly, studies have shown that leptin was found to be related to increased NAFLD severity and increased risk of development and progression of CKD<sup>[26,27]</sup>.

Recently, a study have shown that NAFLD population was associated with a two-fold increase in the incidence and prevalence of CKD compared with non-NAFLD population. Furthermore, the reported incidence and prevalence of CKD were also higher in NASH patients

than in those with NAFLD<sup>[28]</sup>. Nevertheless, several studies strongly suggest the presence of a two-way relationship between CKD and NAFLD<sup>[29,30]</sup>. Thus, some recent studies have reported that CKD could possibly increase the risk for development and progression of NAFLD<sup>[31]</sup>.

In the same context, a recent study reported a significant, positive association between NAFLD and CKD, although this association was weakened after adjustment for features of MetS<sup>[15]</sup>. Similarly, another Taiwanese reported that moderate to severe NAFLD was significantly associated with CKD after adjustment for age, gender, smoking history, MetS, and serum ALT levels. However, this association was not observed in cases with mild NAFLD<sup>[17]</sup>.

Moreover, another recent study reported that NAFLD was associated with a significantly increased risk of CKD compared with those without NAFLD. However, the inclusion of data without adjustment for risk factors for cardio-renal affection, as well as those without a valid control group, may overestimate the association between NAFLD and CKD<sup>[32]</sup>. Also, a recent meta-analysis found that NAFLD patients had a higher risk of incident CKD than those without NAFLD. However, this association between NAFLD and the risk of incident CKD was only observed in Asian populations, but not in European populations<sup>[18]</sup>.

In contrast to the above data, a recent study failed to prove any significant relation between CKD and NAFLD<sup>[33]</sup>. Moreover, a study by *Akahane et al.* reported that CKD prevalence didn't differ between NAFLD and non-NAFLD patients, even after accounting for variability in age, gender, and components of MetS, concluding that NAFLD is not considered a significant independent risk factor for development of CKD<sup>[14]</sup>.

Our study revealed a significant statistical difference among study groups as regard obesity and hypertension, in addition to a highly significant statistical difference as regard MetS. However, no significant statistical difference was reported among study groups as regard DM.

This comes in harmony with a recent study by Cao and colleagues who reported a significant difference among study groups as regard prevalence of CKD and abnormal albuminuria, after accounting for differences in age, gender, in addition to different components of MetS<sup>[7]</sup>. Also, another work by *Akahane et al.* proved an independent association between NAFLD co-morbidities such as hypertension and obesity on one hand and the prevalence of CKD on the other hand. Nevertheless, in their study, there was no association between DM and CKD in NAFLD together with non-NAFLD groups<sup>[14]</sup>.

In this study, NAFLD group showed that 7.6% of patients were obese, 29.1% had DM, 57.0% had hypertension and 27.8% showed features of MetS.

NAFLD is considered to occur mainly in obese patients. Moreover, components of MetS was found to be more prevalent in NAFLD patients, in addition to increasing the risk of development of NAFLD<sup>[34]</sup>.

Several recent studies have pointed out the role of NAFLD in promotion of dyslipidemia, and exacerbation of insulin resistance, in addition to its possible role in the production of pro-inflammatory cytokines that further enhance the development and progression of CKD<sup>[35,36]</sup>.

Dyslipidemia is considered a prominent risk factor for development of NAFLD and CKD. This was shown in a recent study in which low levels of LDL and TG was found to be associated with reduced risk of progression of proteinuria from moderate to severe levels<sup>[37]</sup>. NAFLD patients usually show manifestation of IR, leading to disturbance on lipid metabolism. This can subsequently lead to ectopic accumulation of lipids in the kidney ending in lipotoxicity, which can further promote podocyte and renal tubular injury, leading to further progression of CKD<sup>[38]</sup>.

Recently, several studies have shown a possible relation between obesity, NAFLD, and CKD, with BMI known to be positively correlated with the incidence and progression of kidney disease<sup>[39,40]</sup>. Obesity may lead to both NAFLD and CKD<sup>[41]</sup>.

In our study, there was a non-significant statistical difference among both study groups as regard eGFR. These results comes in accordance with another recent study by Salford which reported a non-significant trend as regard CKD progression in NAFLD patients in comparison to non-NAFLD patients. It also stated that there was no observed differences between study groups as regard the incidence of ESRD<sup>[24]</sup>.

However, the previous results disagree with another study by Zhao and colleagues who reported that NAFLD patients showed more decline in eGFR level in comparison to non-NAFLD patients<sup>[22]</sup>. The previous findings were reinforced by the results of another study by the Korean group which reported that patients with CKD and NAFLD showed more annual percentage decline in eGFR compared with non-NAFLD CKD patients<sup>[23]</sup>.

In the present study, a highly significant statistical difference was shown among NAFLD and non-NAFLD groups as regard ALT, AST, urinary ACR, albumin and glycated hemoglobin. This agrees with Cao and colleagues' study which reported that NAFLD patients showed higher rates of abnormal albuminuria than non-NAFLD patients. In their study, NAFLD was found to be associated with increased risk of CKD and abnormal albuminuria, regardless of cardiac and metabolic risk factors. Moreover, a greater severity of NAFLD was strongly correlated with a higher risk for CKD and abnormal albuminuria. It was also



reported that NAFLD patients with MetS showed higher prevalence of CKD and abnormal albuminuria<sup>[7]</sup>.

Our results also come in accordance with a recent study by *Zhao et al.* who reported that NAFLD patients showed higher serum creatinine and urinary ACR levels and lower eGFR levels when compared to non-NAFLD patients. Additionally, higher urinary ACR levels was significantly correlated to the prevalence and risk of NAFLD<sup>[22]</sup>.

Several recent studies have reported hyperuricemia as an independent risk factor for the development and progression of CKD<sup>[42]</sup>. Recent studies conducted on hypertensive patients have shown that hyperuricemia was associated with more prevalence in CKD, including NAFLD patients<sup>[43]</sup>. Furthermore, recent studies have shown that hyperuricemia is considered an important risk factor for development of obesity and has a significant correlation with degree and severity of inflammation of hepatic lobules in NAFLD patients<sup>[44]</sup>.

Several studies have recently reported the positive benefits of applying dietary and lifestyle modifications for NAFLD patients and have shown that improved NAFLD histology was associated with improved kidney function<sup>[45]</sup>.

In the present study, there was highly significant statistical difference among NAFLD and non-NAFLD groups as regard cholesterol, TG, LDL, and HDL. This slightly agrees with a recent study which reported that total cholesterol, TG, and HDL were found to be significantly higher in NAFLD than in non-NAFLD patients<sup>[7]</sup>. Moreover, a recent study have showed that CKD patients with NAFLD had higher TG and VLDL levels than those without NAFLD, which suggested the possible role of lipid profile in the interaction between NAFLD and CKD<sup>[46]</sup>.

In the current study, a significant statistical difference was shown among both study groups as regard FIB-4 and NFS scores, which comes in accordance with another study which reported that increased severity of NAFLD-associated liver fibrosis, based on non-invasive assessment modalities, also increased the rates of incidence and progression of CKD<sup>[47]</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

NAFLD and CKD show a mutual interlinked relationship. NAFLD, together with its associated comorbidities, including MetS, is considered an important predisposing factor for the development and progression of CKD. NAFLD patients should be advised to undergo meticulous regular follow up of kidney functions and eGFR for early detection and management of CKD. Future large-scale studies should focus on the possible risk factors, etiopathological mechanisms, and available therapeutic modalities that target both NAFLD and CKD.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACR: Albumin-Creatinine ratio
CI: Confidence interval
CKD: Chronic kidney disease
CVEs: Cardiovascular events
DM: Diabetes mellitus
GFR: Glomerular filtration rate
eGFR: Estimated glomerular filtration rate
ESRD: End-stage renal disease
HDL: High-density lipoprotein
HR: Hazard ratio
IR: Insulin resistance
KDIGO: Kidney Disease Improving Global Outcomes
LDL: Low-density lipoprotein
MDRD: Modification of Diet in Renal Disease
MetS: Metabolic syndrome
NAFLD: Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease
NASH: Non-alcoholic steatohepatitis
NFS: NAFLD fibrosis score
OR: Odds ratio
TG: Serum triglycerides
VLDL: Very low-density lipoprotein

## DECLARATIONS ETHICS APPROVAL

This study was performed in accordance with the institutional standards of the research ethics committee of Ain Shams University (Reference Number: FMASU MS 39/2023).

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

## FUNDING

Not applicable.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

EB formulated the main research idea and hypothesis, SE prepared the study design, shared in interpretation of collected data, and shared in revision of the manuscript, MB collected the research samples and data, AM shared in interpretation and analysis of collected data and drafted the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Not applicable.

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## العلاقة بين مرض الكبد الدهني غير الكحولي ومرض الكلى المزمن لدى المرضى المصريين

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**المقدمة:** يعتبر مرض الكبد الدهني غير الكحولي (NAFLD) مرضًا عالميًا عامًا يؤثر في ملايين الأشخاص في جميع أنحاء العالم. وعلى النقيض من ذلك، لا يزال مفهوم مرض الكلى المزمن (CKD) يتطور من كونه نتيجة شائعة لأمراض مختلفة إلى مجموعة من المضاعفات الخطيرة التي تؤثر على أعضاء متعددة في الجسم. تظهر حاليًا موجة من الفرضيات والدراسات التي تشير إلى وجود صلة محتملة بين مرض الكبد الدهني غير الكحولي ومرض الكلى المزمن كمجال مثير للاهتمام في مجال البحث. يعتبر كل من مرض الكلى المزمن ومرض الكبد الدهني غير الكحولي (NAFLD) من الاضطرابات الخطيرة التي تؤدي إلى العديد من المضاعفات وتؤدي إلى أعباء اقتصادية كبيرة في جميع أنحاء العالم.

**الهدف من الدراسة:** هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى تقييم العلاقة بين مرض الكلى المزمن ومرض الكبد الدهني غير الكحولي في المرضى المصريين.

**نتائج الدراسة:** أفادت دراستنا بوجود فرق إحصائي كبير للغاية بين مجموعة مرضى الكبد الدهني غير الكحولي والمجموعة غير المصابة بمرض الكبد الدهني غير الكحولي فيما يتعلق بمراحل مرض الكلى المزمن، على الرغم من وجود فرق كبير بين مجموعات الدراسة فيما يتعلق بمعدل الترشيح الكبيبي المقدر (eGFR). كما ظهر فرق كبير إحصائيًا بين المجموعتين فيما يتعلق بالسمنة وارتفاع ضغط الدم، بالإضافة إلى فرق كبير جدًا فيما يتعلق بمتلازمة التمثيل الغذائي (MetS). في المقابل، كان هناك فرق كبير إحصائيًا بين المجموعتين فيما يتعلق بتطور مرض السكري (DM).

**الاستنتاج:** يرتبط مرض الكبد الدهني غير الكحولي، جنبًا إلى جنب مع الحالات المرضية المصاحبة المختلفة، بإمكانية تطور مرض الكلى المزمن. نوصي بالتقييم الدقيق لمرضى الكبد الدهني غير الكحولي، وخاصة أولئك الذين يعانون من أمراض مصاحبة، لتطور مرض الكلى المزمن. يجب أن تركز الدراسات المستقبلية على عوامل الخطر المحتملة والآليات السببية والأهداف العلاجية المحتملة لكل من مرض الكبد الدهني غير الكحولي ومرض الكلى المزمن في حالة مرضية مصاحبة.