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ASSOCIATION BETWEEN TYPE 2 DIABETES MELLITUS AND NAFLD PROGRESSION: A COMPREHENSIVE NARRATIVE REVIEW

Dr. Aman Khandelwal
Assistant Teacher, Samarkand State Medical University, Uzbekistan
Aman3238@gmail.com

Sameer R.
Medical Student, Samarkand State Medical University, Uzbekistan
gpsameer51@gmail.com

Safrin Nisha J.
Medcial Student, Samarkand State Medical University, Uzbekistan
safrinnisha1220@gmail.com

Isha Maryam S.
Medcial Student, Samarkand State Medical University, Uzbekistan
itsmeziah07@gmail.com

Abstract

Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) and type 2 diabetes mellitus (T2DM) represent two intertwined epidemics of the modern era, sharing common pathophysiological roots in insulin resistance and metabolic dysfunction. This comprehensive narrative review examines the bidirectional relationship between T2DM and NAFLD progression, exploring the epidemiological burden, molecular mechanisms, clinical implications, and emerging therapeutic strategies. The global prevalence of NAFLD has risen dramatically to

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approximately 38% among adults, with T2DM present in up to 70% of NAFLD patients. Conversely, 55-70% of T2DM patients develop NAFLD, and 20-40% progress to non-alcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH). Multiple meta-analyses have confirmed that T2DM doubles the risk of severe liver disease events and increases the risk of hepatocellular carcinoma by 2.0-2.5 fold. The pathophysiological nexus centers on insulin resistance-driven lipotoxicity, chronic low-grade inflammation, and oxidative stress, perpetuating a vicious cycle of metabolic deterioration. Recent advances in pharmacotherapy, including the FDA approval of resmetirom in March 2024 as the first targeted treatment for NASH with fibrosis, combined with the established benefits of GLP-1 receptor agonists, SGLT2 inhibitors, and pioglitazone, have transformed the therapeutic landscape. Early identification through non-invasive screening algorithms and integrated management approaches targeting both metabolic and hepatic endpoints are essential for improving outcomes in this high-risk population.

Keywords: NAFLD, Type 2 Diabetes Mellitus, NASH, Fibrosis, Insulin Resistance, MASLD, Resmetirom, GLP-1 Receptor Agonists, Non-invasive Testing.

Introduction

The global burden of chronic metabolic diseases has reached unprecedented proportions, with non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) and type 2 diabetes mellitus (T2DM) emerging as two of the most significant public health challenges of the twenty-first century. NAFLD, recently rebranded as metabolic dysfunction-associated steatotic liver disease (MASLD), encompasses a spectrum of conditions ranging from simple hepatic steatosis to non-alcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH), progressive fibrosis, cirrhosis, and ultimately hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC). This disease spectrum represents the hepatic manifestation of the metabolic syndrome, intimately linked with obesity, insulin resistance, dyslipidemia, and cardiovascular disease.

The relationship between T2DM and NAFLD is neither incidental nor unidirectional. Instead, a robust body of evidence supports a bidirectional association wherein each condition independently promotes the onset and progression of the other. The prevalence of NAFLD among patients with T2DM

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ranges from 55% to 75%, while approximately 23% of individuals with NAFLD concurrently have T2DM. More importantly, the presence of diabetes significantly accelerates NAFLD progression, with T2DM patients demonstrating a substantially higher risk of developing NASH, advanced fibrosis, cirrhosis, and HCC compared to their non-diabetic counterparts.

In March 2024, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved resmetirom (Rezdiffra) as the first pharmacological therapy specifically indicated for NASH with moderate to advanced fibrosis, heralding a new era in the management of this previously treatment-resistant condition. This landmark approval, alongside the expanding therapeutic armamentarium of glucagon-like peptide-1 (GLP-1) receptor agonists and sodium-glucose cotransporter-2 (SGLT2) inhibitors, has fundamentally transformed clinical approaches to patients with coexisting T2DM and NAFLD. This review provides a comprehensive examination of the association between T2DM and NAFLD progression, synthesizing current evidence on epidemiology, pathophysiology, clinical implications, and therapeutic strategies.

2. Epidemiology and Global Burden

The global prevalence of NAFLD has increased substantially over the past three decades, rising from approximately 25.3% during 1990-2006 to 38.0% during 2016-2019 according to systematic reviews and meta-analyses. Currently, an estimated 1.27 billion individuals worldwide are affected by NAFLD, with projections indicating continued escalation driven by the global obesity and diabetes epidemics. The prevalence varies considerably across geographic regions, with the highest rates observed in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and Latin America, coinciding with areas of high metabolic disease burden.

Among patients with T2DM, the prevalence of NAFLD is strikingly elevated, ranging from 55% to 75%, with some studies reporting rates as high as 70% when using sensitive imaging modalities such as magnetic resonance spectroscopy. Furthermore, 20-40% of T2DM patients with NAFLD progress to NASH, and 12-20% develop clinically significant fibrosis (stage F2 or greater). The prevalence of advanced fibrosis (F3-F4) in T2DM patients with NAFLD is approximately 12-20%, compared to only 5-7% in the general population. These

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statistics underscore the critical importance of systematic screening and risk stratification in diabetic populations.

Table 1: Global Prevalence of NAFLD and Associated Complications in T2DM Populations

Parameter	General Population	T2DM Patients	Reference
NAFLD Prevalence	25-38%	55-75%	Younossi 2019
NASH Prevalence	2-6%	20-40%	Cernea 2024
Significant Fibrosis (>=F2)	5-7%	12-20%	EASL 2016
Advanced Fibrosis (F3-F4)	2-3%	6-10%	AASLD 2023
HCC Risk (vs. no T2DM)	Baseline	2.0-2.5x	Jarvis 2020
Severe Liver Disease HR	1.0	2.25 (1.83-2.76)	Jarvis 2020

A landmark meta-analysis by Jarvis and colleagues, encompassing 12 population-based cohort studies with 22.8 million subjects followed for 10 years, demonstrated that T2DM doubles the risk of severe liver disease events (hazard ratio: 2.25, 95% CI: 1.83-2.76, $p < 0.001$) and increases the risk of fatal liver events by 63%. Similarly, the real-world study by Alexander and colleagues of 18 million European patients confirmed diabetes as an independent predictor of liver disease progression, with the strongest association observed for cirrhosis and HCC outcomes (HR: 2.3, 95% CI: 1.9-2.78). The study by Kanwal and colleagues, which included 271,906 patients with NAFLD followed for 9.3 years, identified diabetes as the only metabolic risk factor independently associated with progression to HCC (adjusted HR: 2.77, 95% CI: 2.03-3.77).

3. Pathophysiology of the Bidirectional Relationship

The intricate relationship between T2DM and NAFLD progression is orchestrated through a complex network of metabolic, inflammatory, and genetic pathways. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for developing targeted therapeutic interventions and identifying high-risk populations.

3.1 Insulin Resistance as the Central Mechanism

Insulin resistance represents the fundamental pathophysiological defect linking T2DM and NAFLD. In the physiological state, insulin suppresses hepatic glucose production and promotes lipogenesis through distinct signaling pathways.

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However, in insulin-resistant states, a paradoxical dissociation occurs wherein hepatic gluconeogenesis becomes resistant to insulin-mediated suppression while de novo lipogenesis (DNL) paradoxically increases or remains unabated. This phenomenon, termed pathway-selective hepatic insulin resistance, is mediated through multiple mechanisms including persistent activation of the mammalian target of rapamycin complex 1 (mTORC1) and sterol regulatory element-binding protein-1c (SREBP-1c) pathways.

The insulin-resistant adipose tissue exhibits enhanced lipolysis, releasing increased quantities of free fatty acids (FFAs) into the portal circulation. These FFAs become the primary substrate for hepatic triglyceride synthesis, contributing approximately 59% of intrahepatic lipid content. Additional contributions come from DNL (26%) and dietary sources (14%). The resulting hepatic steatosis further exacerbates insulin resistance through lipid-induced activation of protein kinase C isoforms, diacylglycerol-mediated inhibition of insulin receptor signaling, and ceramide-induced suppression of Akt phosphorylation. This self-perpetuating cycle creates a metabolic environment conducive to disease progression in both the liver and systemic glucose homeostasis.

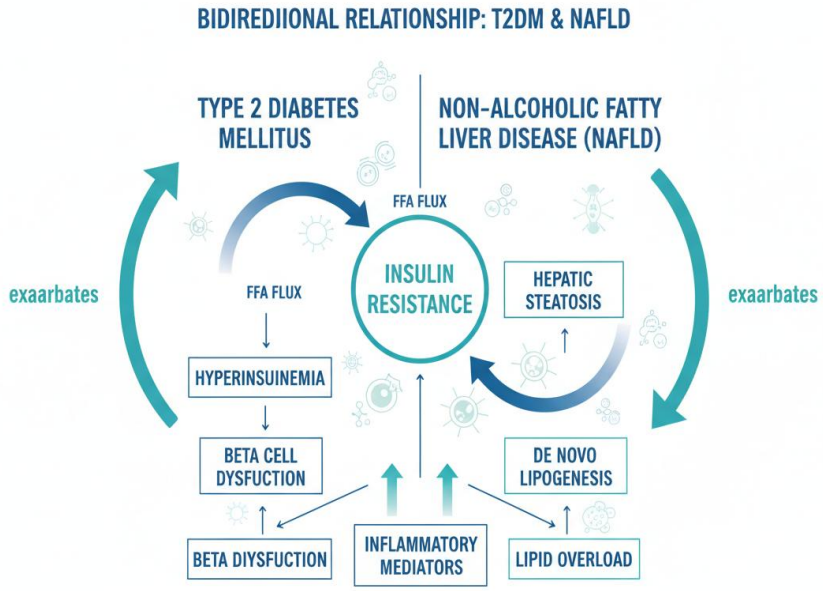

Figure 1: Bidirectional Relationship Between T2DM and NAFLD. Insulin resistance serves as the central pathophysiological mechanism driving disease progression in both directions.

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3.2 Inflammatory Pathways and Oxidative Stress

The progression from simple steatosis to NASH and fibrosis requires a second pathological insult, commonly referred to as the two-hit hypothesis. This second hit encompasses oxidative stress, mitochondrial dysfunction, endoplasmic reticulum stress, and activation of inflammatory cascades. In the context of T2DM, hyperglycemia-induced glucotoxicity synergizes with lipotoxicity to generate reactive oxygen species (ROS), promote mitochondrial dysfunction, and trigger hepatocyte injury and death.

The nuclear factor-kappa B (NF-kappaB) pathway plays a pivotal role in NAFLD-associated inflammation. Activation of NF-kappaB, through upstream kinases including inhibitor of nuclear factor kappa-B kinase beta (IKKbeta) and c-Jun N-terminal kinase (JNK), induces transcription of pro-inflammatory cytokines such as tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-alpha), interleukin-6 (IL-6), and interleukin-1beta (IL-1beta). Meta-analyses have demonstrated significant associations between NAFLD and elevated circulating levels of C-reactive protein (CRP), IL-1beta, IL-6, TNF-alpha, and intercellular adhesion molecule-1. The NOD-like receptor protein 3 (NLRP3) inflammasome, activated by cholesterol crystals and saturated fatty acids, further amplifies inflammation through caspase-1-mediated processing of IL-1beta and IL-18.

The transforming growth factor-beta 1 (TGF-beta1) pathway represents a critical driver of hepatic fibrogenesis. TGF-beta1 activates hepatic stellate cells (HSCs), promoting their transdifferentiation into myofibroblasts and stimulating excessive extracellular matrix deposition. Recent evidence indicates that insulin and insulin-like growth factor 1 (IGF-1) can directly induce HSC proliferation and collagen synthesis through PI3K- and ERK-dependent pathways, providing a mechanistic explanation for accelerated fibrosis progression in diabetic patients.

3.3 Genetic and Epigenetic Factors

Genetic susceptibility significantly modulates the risk and progression of NAFLD in the context of T2DM. Genome-wide association studies have identified several variants that influence disease trajectory. The PNPLA3 rs738409 polymorphism (I148M variant) represents the most well-characterized genetic risk factor, being associated with hepatic fat accumulation and increased risk of fibrosis progression. Interestingly, this variant does not appear to increase

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insulin resistance risk, suggesting an independent effect on hepatic lipid metabolism.

The TM6SF2 rs58542926 variant (E167K) and MBOAT7 rs641738 variant have also been implicated in NAFLD susceptibility and progression. Recent cluster analysis of T2DM subtypes revealed that severe insulin-resistant diabetes (SIRD), characterized by high BMI and elevated HOMA-IR, had the highest prevalence of NAFLD (24.1%) and the highest estimates of liver fibrosis. Combined polymorphisms of PNPLA3 and TM6SF2 significantly increase the risk of cirrhosis, with odds ratios reaching 18.48 for combined risk alleles in longitudinal studies. Epigenetic modifications, including DNA methylation changes and microRNA dysregulation, further contribute to disease progression by altering expression of genes involved in glucose and lipid metabolism.

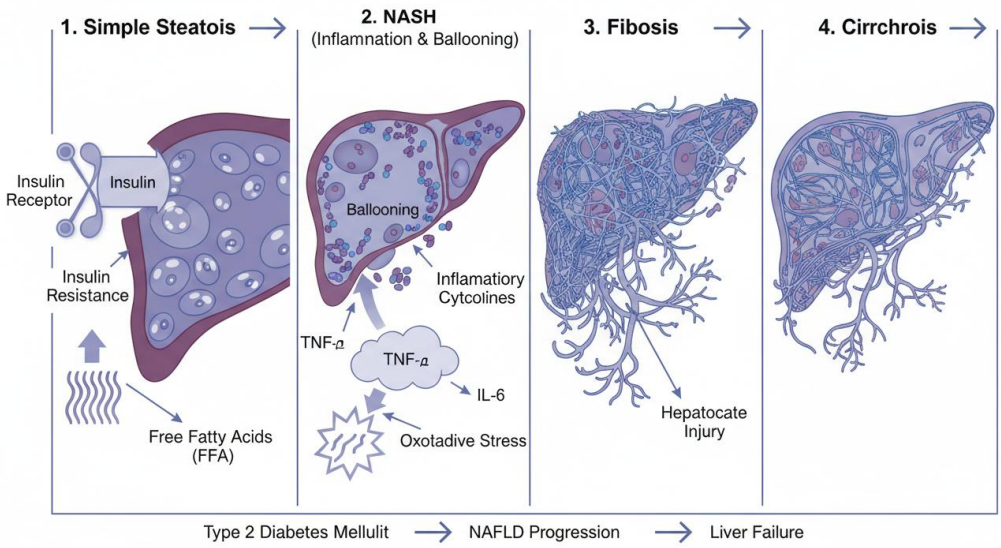

Figure 2: NAFLD Disease Spectrum - From Simple Steatosis to Cirrhosis. The progressive stages of NAFLD are driven by insulin resistance, lipotoxicity, inflammation, and fibrogenesis.

4. Clinical Implications and Diagnosis

The recognition of T2DM as a major risk factor for NAFLD progression has prompted the development of structured screening algorithms and risk stratification tools. Current guidelines from the American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases (AASLD) and the American Association of Clinical

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Endocrinology (AACE) recommend systematic screening for NAFLD in patients with T2DM, particularly those with additional metabolic risk factors.

Non-invasive testing (NIT) has largely replaced liver biopsy for initial screening and risk stratification. The Fibrosis-4 (FIB-4) index, calculated from age, aspartate aminotransferase (AST), alanine aminotransferase (ALT), and platelet count, serves as the recommended first-line screening tool. A FIB-4 score below 1.3 effectively rules out advanced fibrosis, while a score exceeding 2.67 suggests high probability of advanced fibrosis warranting specialist referral. Emerging evidence suggests that lowering the FIB-4 threshold to 1.0 in diabetic patients may improve sensitivity without substantially compromising specificity, given their higher baseline risk.

Table 2: Non-Invasive Tests for NAFLD Fibrosis Assessment in T2DM Patients

Test	Components	Cutoff (Rule Out)	Cutoff (Rule In)	Limitations
FIB-4	Age, AST, ALT, Platelets	< 1.3	> 2.67	Age-dependent; reduced accuracy in young/old
NFS	Age, BMI, DM, AST/ALT, PLT, Albumin	<-1.455	> 0.676	Requires BMI; less accurate in obesity
ELF	HA, PIIINP, TIMP-1	< 7.7	> 9.8	Higher cost; limited availability
VCTE (kPa)	Liver stiffness	< 6.0	> 9.6	Obesity; operator-dependent
MRE (kPa)	Liver stiffness	< 2.5	> 3.6	Cost; availability; claustrophobia

The Enhanced Liver Fibrosis (ELF) test, which measures tissue inhibitor of metalloproteinases-1, amino-terminal propeptide of type III procollagen, and hyaluronic acid, serves as a valuable second-line assessment tool. When used sequentially after FIB-4, the combination achieves diagnostic accuracy with approximately 90% specificity for advanced fibrosis. Vibration-controlled transient elastography (VCTE) and magnetic resonance elastography (MRE) provide additional non-invasive assessment of liver stiffness, with MRE offering superior accuracy particularly in obese patients.

The clinical implications of the T2DM-NAFLD association extend beyond hepatic outcomes. NAFLD in diabetic patients is independently associated with increased risks of cardiovascular disease, chronic kidney disease, and all-cause mortality. The cardiovascular-kidney-metabolic (CKM) syndrome framework

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recently proposed by the American Heart Association positions NAFLD as an integral component of a multisystem disease continuum, necessitating comprehensive risk factor management.

5. Therapeutic Strategies

The management of NAFLD in patients with T2DM requires a multifaceted approach targeting metabolic dysfunction, hepatic inflammation, and fibrogenesis. Lifestyle modification remains the cornerstone of therapy, with evidence demonstrating that weight loss of 7-10% can achieve NASH resolution and fibrosis regression. However, pharmacological therapy is increasingly recognized as necessary given the challenges of sustained lifestyle change and the progressive nature of disease in diabetic populations.

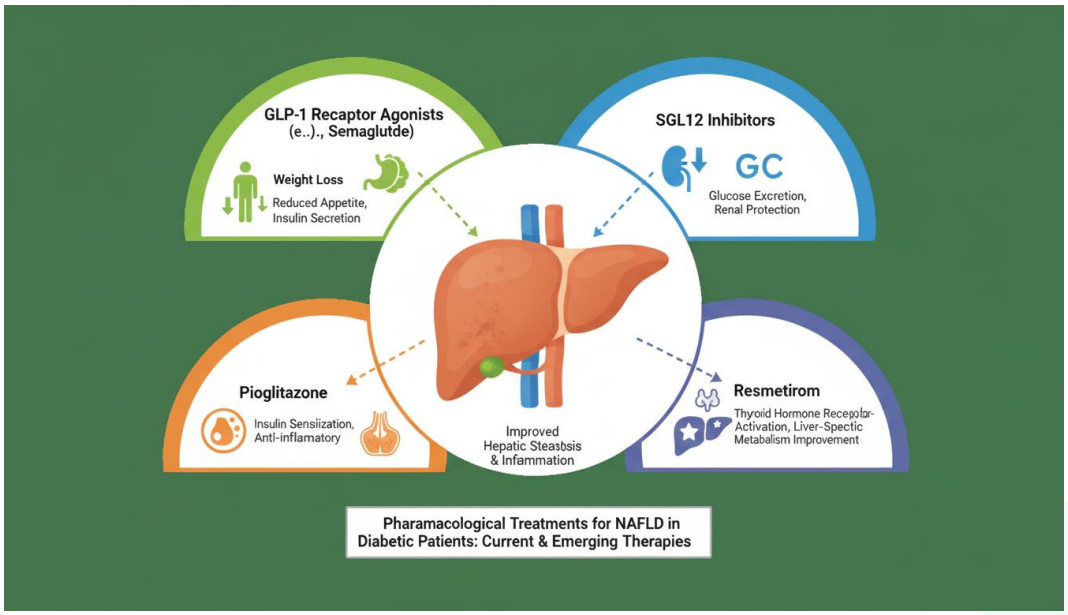

Figure 3: Pharmacological Treatment Options for NAFLD in T2DM Patients. Current and emerging therapies target multiple pathophysiological pathways.

Pioglitazone, a thiazolidinedione peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor-gamma (PPAR-gamma) agonist, was the first pharmacological agent to demonstrate histological benefits in NASH through its insulin-sensitizing and anti-inflammatory effects. The PIVENS trial and subsequent studies confirmed that pioglitazone improves hepatic steatosis and inflammation, with benefits sustained at low doses (15-30 mg daily). Current guidelines recommend pioglitazone for biopsy-proven NASH in T2DM patients, with attention to

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potential side effects including weight gain, fluid retention, and bone density reduction.

GLP-1 receptor agonists have emerged as promising therapeutic agents given their dual benefits for glycemic control and weight reduction. The LEAN trial demonstrated that liraglutide 1.8 mg daily achieved NASH resolution in 39% of patients versus 9% with placebo. Semaglutide 2.4 mg weekly showed even more impressive results, with 59% of treated patients achieving NASH resolution in phase 3 trials. Beyond histological improvement, GLP-1 receptor agonists provide substantial cardiovascular benefits, making them particularly attractive for T2DM patients with established atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease.

SGLT2 inhibitors, while primarily indicated for glycemic control and cardiorenal protection, demonstrate beneficial effects on NAFLD through multiple mechanisms including weight reduction, decreased hepatic fat content, and anti-inflammatory properties. Meta-analyses indicate significant reductions in liver enzymes, hepatic steatosis, and liver stiffness with SGLT2 inhibitor therapy. Although not currently recommended as targeted NASH therapy, their use is encouraged in T2DM patients with NAFLD given the overlapping cardiometabolic risk profile.

The FDA approval of resmetirom in March 2024 represents a paradigm shift in NASH therapeutics. As a liver-directed, selective thyroid hormone receptor-beta agonist, resmetirom enhances mitochondrial fatty acid oxidation and reduces hepatic lipotoxicity. The MAESTRO-NASH phase 3 trial demonstrated that resmetirom 100 mg achieved NASH resolution in 30% of patients versus 10% with placebo, with fibrosis improvement in 26% versus 14%. Notably, resmetirom also reduces LDL cholesterol, addressing the dyslipidemia commonly associated with NAFLD. The drug is indicated for noncirrhotic NASH with moderate to advanced fibrosis (F2-F3), and its approval has established a new standard of care for this previously treatment-resistant population.

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Table 3: Pharmacological Agents for NAFLD/NASH Management in T2DM Patients

Agent	Mechanism	Key Benefits	Considerations
Pioglitazone	PPAR-gamma agonist; insulin sensitizer	NASH resolution; histologic improvement	Weight gain; fluid retention; bone loss
GLP-1 RAs	GLP-1 receptor agonist	NASH resolution (39-59%); weight loss; CV benefit	GI effects; injection; cost
SGLT2i	SGLT2 inhibition	Reduced steatosis; weight loss; cardiorenal protection	Genital infections; euglycemic DKA risk
Resmetirom	THR-beta agonist (liver-selective)	NASH resolution (30%); fibrosis improvement; LDL reduction	Diarrhea; gallstones; monitoring required
Tirzepatide	Dual GIP/GLP-1 agonist	NASH resolution; superior A1c reduction; weight loss	Injection; GI effects; cost

Emerging therapeutic approaches include dual and triple incretin agonists (e.g., tirzepatide), fibroblast growth factor-21 (FGF-21) analogs, PPAR pan-agonists (e.g., lanifibranor), and combination therapies targeting multiple pathophysiological pathways. The optimal therapeutic strategy for individual patients should be personalized based on fibrosis stage, glycemic control, cardiovascular risk, comorbidities, and patient preferences.

6. Conclusion

The association between type 2 diabetes mellitus and NAFLD progression represents one of the most significant clinical challenges in contemporary hepatology and endocrinology. The bidirectional relationship, anchored by insulin resistance and perpetuated through inflammatory, oxidative, and fibrogenic pathways, creates a vicious cycle that accelerates disease progression in both the liver and systemic metabolic homeostasis. The global prevalence of NAFLD continues to rise, with diabetic populations bearing a disproportionately severe disease burden characterized by higher rates of NASH, advanced fibrosis, cirrhosis, and hepatocellular carcinoma.

The therapeutic landscape has been fundamentally transformed by recent advances. The FDA approval of resmetirom heralds a new era of targeted pharmacotherapy for NASH with fibrosis, while the established benefits of GLP-1 receptor agonists, SGLT2 inhibitors, and pioglitazone provide multiple

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evidence-based options for patients with coexisting T2DM and NAFLD. These pharmacological advances, combined with structured screening algorithms using non-invasive tests and comprehensive lifestyle interventions, offer unprecedented opportunities for early identification and effective management.

Moving forward, several priorities emerge. First, implementation of systematic screening protocols in primary care and endocrinology practices is essential to identify the substantial proportion of at-risk patients who remain undiagnosed. Second, the integration of the cardiovascular-kidney-metabolic syndrome framework into clinical practice can facilitate comprehensive risk assessment and management. Third, continued research into combination therapies targeting multiple pathophysiological pathways holds promise for further improving outcomes. Finally, addressing barriers to treatment access, including medication costs and healthcare disparities, will be critical for translating therapeutic advances into population-level health improvements. The convergence of enhanced understanding of disease mechanisms and expanded therapeutic options provides genuine hope for reducing the substantial morbidity and mortality associated with the T2DM-NAFLD interplay.

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