

Liver Cancer

What is liver cancer?

Primary liver cancer is cancer that begins in the liver. About 80% of primary liver cancer is hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC). Other subtypes of primary liver cancer include bile duct cancer and angiosarcoma, a cancer of the blood vessels in the liver. Liver cancer is less common in the United States than in other parts of the world.

What is the function of the liver?

The liver is the largest internal organ in the body and is essential for digesting food. The liver performs many other functions, including collecting and filtering blood from the intestines, removing toxic wastes from the body, storing energy, and making proteins. No one can survive without a liver.

What does stage mean?

The stage is a way of describing where the cancer is located, if or where it has spread, and whether it is affecting other parts of the body. Doctors may also determine stage based on whether the tumor can be removed with surgery. There are four stages for HCC: stages I through IV (one through four). More information about these stages can be found at www.cancer.net/liver.

How is liver cancer treated?

The treatment of HCC depends on the size and location of the tumor, whether the cancer has spread, whether the tumor can be removed with surgery, and the person's overall health. Treatment also depends on liver function, as people who develop liver cancer may have liver damage related to infection (viral hepatitis), exposure to chemicals (alcohol and some industrial solvents), or fat buildup caused by obesity. Surgery to remove the tumor is likely to be the most successful treatment option, particularly for a tumor smaller than 5 centimeters (about 2 inches). Other options to get rid of a tumor are liver transplantation; thermal ablation, which uses heat to destroy cancer cells; and percutaneous ethanol injection, which uses alcohol injected directly into the liver tumor to destroy cancer cells. Radiation therapy, targeted therapy, and injecting chemotherapy into the liver, called chemoembolization, may also be used to treat HCC. When making treatment decisions, people may also consider a clinical trial; talk with your doctor about all treatment options and the goals of each treatment. The side effects of liver cancer treatment can often be prevented or managed with the help of your health care team. This is called supportive care and is an important part of the overall treatment plan.

How can I cope with liver cancer?

Absorbing the news of a cancer diagnosis and communicating with your health care team are key parts of the coping process. Seeking support, organizing your health information, making sure all of your questions are answered, and participating in the decision-making process are other steps. Talk with your health care team about any concerns. Understanding your emotions and those of people close to you can be helpful in managing the diagnosis, treatment, and healing process.

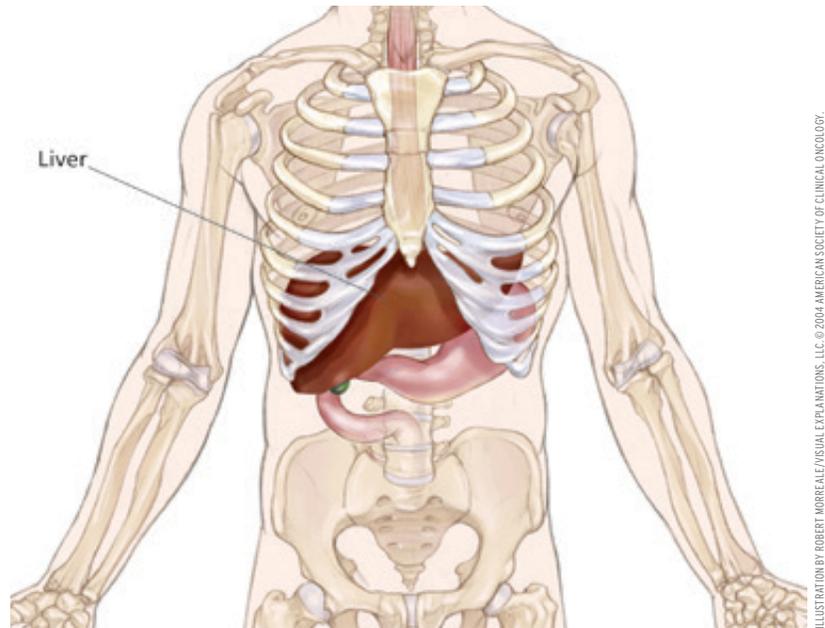


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Questions to ask the doctor

Regular communication is important in making informed decisions about your health care. Consider asking the following questions of your health care team:

- What type of liver cancer do I have?
- Am I a carrier of the hepatitis B or C virus? What does this mean?
- Do I have cirrhosis of the liver? What does this mean?
- Do I have nonalcoholic fatty liver disease? What does this mean?
- Can you explain my pathology report (laboratory test results) to me?
- What stage is the liver cancer?
- Can the tumor be removed surgically?
- Would you explain my treatment options? What clinical trials are open to me?
- What treatment plan do you recommend? Why?
- What is the goal of each treatment? Is it to eliminate the cancer, help me feel better, or both?
- Who will be part of my treatment team, and what does each member do?
- How will this treatment affect my daily life? Will I be able to work, exercise, and perform my usual activities?
- Will this treatment affect my ability to become pregnant or have children?
- What long-term side effects may be associated with my cancer treatment?
- If I'm worried about managing the costs related to my cancer care, who can help me with this concern?
- Where can I find emotional support for me and my family?
- Whom should I call for questions or problems?
- Is there anything else I should be asking?

Additional questions to ask the doctor can be found at www.cancer.net/liver.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Benign:

A tumor that is not cancerous

Biopsy:

Removal of a tissue sample that is then examined under a microscope to check for cancer cells

Cirrhosis:

Scarring of the liver due to injury or long-term disease

Chemotherapy:

The use of drugs to destroy cancer cells

Hepatectomy:

Removal of the cancerous part of the liver

Lymph node:

A tiny, bean-shaped organ that fights infection

Malignant:

A tumor that is cancerous

Metastasis:

The spread of cancer from where it began to another part of the body

Oncologist:

A doctor who specializes in treating cancer

Prognosis:

Chance of recovery

Radiation therapy:

The use of high-energy x-rays to destroy cancer cells

Tumor:

An abnormal growth of body tissue

Viral hepatitis:

Inflammation of the liver caused by a virus

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