

About Liver Cancer

A Quick Guide

Contents

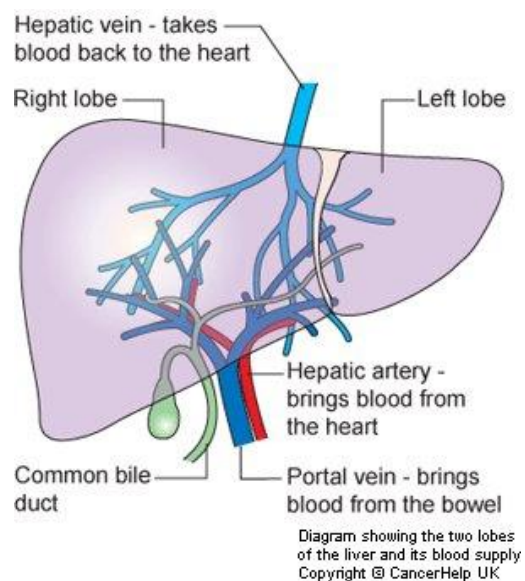
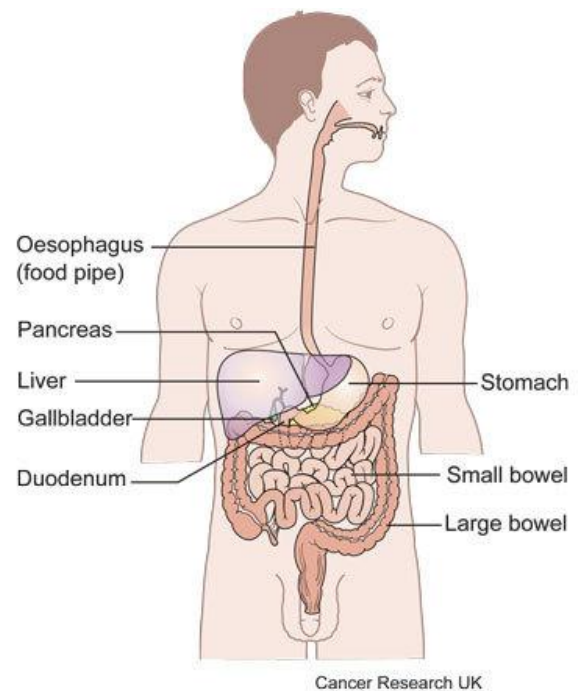
This is a brief summary of 'About liver cancer' from our website. You will find more detailed information on there. In this information there are sections on

- The liver
- Liver cancer risks and causes
- Symptoms of liver cancer
- Screening for liver cancer
- Types of liver cancer
- Should I see a liver cancer specialist?
- Questions for your doctor

You can view this information in a larger print on our website.

The liver

The liver is the second largest organ in the body after the skin. It is found below your right lung and is protected by the lower ribs on that side. The liver is divided into 2 main lobes, the larger right lobe and smaller left lobe.



The liver is the chemical factory of the body. It performs many important jobs including:

- Storing some nutrients
- Converting fats to energy when the body needs it
- Producing bile - a substance that helps the digestion and absorption of food
- Making proteins
- Helping the blood to clot
- Making other substances the body needs
- Breaking down harmful substances including alcohol, many drugs and waste products from normal body processes

Liver cancer risks and causes

Primary liver cancer is quite rare in the UK, but it is increasing. It is more common in men than in women. Our risk of liver cancer gets higher as we get older.

Anything that increases your risk of getting a disease is a risk factor. Risk factors for a type of liver cancer called hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) in people living in the UK include

- Scarring of the liver due to previous damage (cirrhosis)
- Long term alcohol drinking
- A condition called non alcoholic fatty liver disease
- Infection with hepatitis viruses
- Smoking
- Low immunity due to HIV/AIDS or taking medicines after an organ transplant
- Having a family history of liver cancer
- Diabetes
- Being overweight
- Chemicals such as vinyl chloride, arsenic, polychlorinated biphenyls and trichloroethylene

Aflatoxin is a substance found in mouldy peanuts, wheat, soya beans, corn and rice. People from Africa and Asia who have eaten these over a long period of time have an increased risk of liver cancer.

Primary and secondary cancer

Most cases of liver cancer in the UK are cancer that has spread into the liver from somewhere else in the body (secondary liver cancer). If you have secondary liver cancer, this is not the right information for you. You need to look for information in the section of this website that relates to your type of primary cancer.

Symptoms of liver cancer

The symptoms of primary liver cancer can include:

- Significant loss of weight that cannot be explained
- Loss of appetite over a period of a few weeks
- Being sick
- Feeling full or bloated after eating, even after a small meal
- Pain or discomfort in the tummy (abdomen)
- A swollen tummy (abdomen)
- Yellowish skin (jaundice), dark coloured urine and pale coloured faeces
- Itching
- A sudden worsening of health in somebody with known chronic hepatitis or cirrhosis (scarring of the liver)
- A high temperature and sweating

Many of these symptoms are vague. All can be caused by other conditions such as infection. But if you have any of these symptoms you should see your doctor.

Screening for liver cancer

Screening means testing for early stages of a disease before there are any symptoms. Before doctors can screen for any type of cancer, they must have an accurate test to use. The test must be reliable in picking up cancers that are there. And it must not give false positive results in people who do not have cancer. At the moment, there is no screening test that is reliable enough to use for primary liver cancer across the whole population.

If you are at higher risk

For any rare cancer, it is most cost effective to screen people who are thought to be at higher risk. Doctors are aware of some groups of people who are at increased risk of developing hepatocellular cancers (HCC), for example if you have liver cirrhosis (scarring of the liver).

If you are at higher risk, you will have an ultrasound every 6 months to look for growths in your liver. You may also have a 6 monthly blood test for AFP (alpha fetoprotein). The level of AFP in the blood can be raised in some people with HCC.

Having these regular tests can pick up hepatocellular cancers earlier, when they are smaller and surgery may be possible.

Types of liver cancer

Cancers are named after their original cell type, from the organ where the cancer first begins to grow (the primary cancer). Cancer cells can break away from the primary site and travel to other parts of the body. This is called a secondary cancer. But the cells are still the same type – that of the primary cancer. This is important because cancers are treated according to the original cell type.

In the UK, most cancers found in the liver are secondary cancer. **If you have had cancer elsewhere before you developed cancer in your liver, this is not the right information for you.** You need to look at the section for your type of primary cancer.

Hepatocellular carcinoma

This is the most common type of primary liver cancer. It is much more likely to develop in men than women. It also becomes more common with increasing age.

Fibrolamellar carcinoma

This is a rare sub type of hepatocellular carcinoma. It tends to develop in younger people, and is not usually linked with cirrhosis or hepatitis.

Other types of liver cancer

- Cholangiocarcinoma, which starts in the cells that line the bile duct
- Angiosarcoma (or haemangiosarcoma), which starts in the blood vessels of the liver and is extremely rare
- Hepatoblastoma, which is very rare and usually affects young children

Should I see a liver cancer specialist?

It can be very difficult for GPs to decide who may have a suspected cancer and who has something much less serious. But there are particular symptoms that mean your GP should refer you to a specialist straight away. National guidelines say that the following symptoms need an urgent referral to a specialist

- Unexplained tummy (abdominal) pain and weight loss, with or without back pain
- Swelling of your upper abdomen (tummy)
- Feeling and being sick continuously, and losing weight
- Jaundice (yellowing skin) caused by a blockage

You should ideally get an appointment within 2 weeks for an urgent referral. If you have symptoms and you do not think your GP is taking them seriously enough, you could print this information and take it to your appointment. You may be able to decide together whether you need to see a specialist, and how soon.

What to ask your doctor about liver cancer

- How would I know if I had primary liver cancer?
- A member of my family has liver cancer – am I at risk of getting it myself?
- Can you explain to me the difference between a primary and secondary liver cancer?
- Is liver cancer more likely to be caused by spread from another cancer?
- How common is primary liver cancer?
- Does drinking alcohol increase liver cancer risk?
- As I've had cirrhosis, does this increase my liver cancer risk?
- Should I be screened?
- What screening tests are available?
- Is there anything I can do to reduce my risk of primary liver cancer?

For more information, visit our website <http://www.cruk.org/about-cancer>

You will find a wide range of detailed, up to date information for people affected by cancer, including a clinical trials database that you can search for trials in the UK. Our information is based on the best current scientific evidence and reviewed regularly by leading clinicians and experts in health and social care.

For answers to your questions about cancer call our Cancer Information Nurses on 0808 800 4040 9am till 5pm Monday to Friday.

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