

Diagnosing Liver Cancer

A Quick Guide

Contents

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

- Tests for liver cancer
- Further tests
- Questions for your doctor

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

Tests for liver cancer

You will usually see your family doctor (GP) first, who will examine you and ask about your general health. Your doctor will ask you about your symptoms, including when you get them and whether anything you do makes them better or worse. If your doctor feels that further tests are needed, they will refer you to a specialist at your local hospital.

At the hospital

The specialist will ask about your medical history and symptoms. They will examine you and feel your tummy (abdomen). You may have some blood tests, called liver function tests (LFTs). Your doctor may also check the level of a chemical in your blood called alpha fetoprotein (AFP). The level can be raised in many people with hepatocellular cancer. You may also have scans such as an ultrasound scan, CT scan or MRI scan.

Biopsy and laparoscopy

The only way to definitely diagnose liver cancer is to take a sample of tissue. This is called a biopsy. You may have a biopsy at the same time as an ultrasound or CT scan. Or, you may have a small operation called a laparoscopy. The surgeon puts a thin tube, with a camera and a light, into your abdomen through a small cut. This allows your surgeon to look directly at your liver and take samples of tissue.

Not everyone needs a biopsy. Your doctor may be able to give a diagnosis from looking at the results of all your scans and blood tests. If you go on to have surgery to remove the cancer, your doctor can confirm the diagnosis afterwards.

Further tests

If your earlier tests show you have liver cancer, your specialist may ask you to have further tests to see if the cancer has spread or not. The results will help your doctor decide on the best possible treatment for you. These further tests may include chest X-rays, a CT scan or MRI scan and possibly hepatic angiography.

Hepatic angiography is useful for doctors to see the arteries that supply blood to the liver. And to see how close any liver tumours are to major blood vessels. The test is done in the X-ray department. You may have it as an outpatient or you may need to stay in hospital overnight. The doctor injects a dye into one of your arteries. The dye travels through your bloodstream. X-ray pictures show the blood vessels as the dye reaches your liver.

After the tests

Your doctor will ask you to go back to the hospital when your test results have come through. This is bound to take a little time, even if only a week or so. You are likely to feel anxious during this time. While you are waiting for results it may help to talk to your cancer specialist nurse, or a close friend or relative about how you are feeling. Or you may want to contact a cancer support group to talk to someone who has been through a similar experience.

What to ask your doctor about liver cancer tests

- What tests are you going to do?
- What are you looking for?
- Will the tests show whether I have cancer?
- Will the tests show whether my cancer can be operated on?
- Are any of the tests painful?
- Are there any risks with any of these tests?
- Can I eat normally before these tests?
- What are the side effects of these tests?
- Will I have to stay in hospital for any of these tests?
- How long will the results take?
- Who will give me the test results?

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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