

Liver Cancer

Information for Patients

What is liver cancer?

Liver cancer begins in the liver itself. The other name for liver cancer is hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC). Liver cancer is not the same as a cancer that starts in another site (such as lung or colon) and then spreads to the liver.

Who gets liver cancer?

People who have cirrhosis (advanced scarring of the liver) are at risk of developing liver cancer. Liver cancer is one of the most significant complications that can develop from cirrhosis. In some conditions, such as with hepatitis B virus infection, HCC can occur before cirrhosis develops.

How is a liver cancer diagnosed?

Most people with liver cancer do not experience symptoms early on. Eventually, some may experience swelling or pain in the abdomen, jaundice (yellowing skin or eyes), itchy skin, nausea/vomiting, and/or weight loss. Ideally, liver cancer would be found very soon after it develops. Screening means looking for a problem before a person develops symptoms. All patients with cirrhosis need to be screened for HCC with radiology tests (such as ultrasound) every 6 months. If liver cancer is suspected from those test results, more advanced radiology studies (such as CT or MRI) and blood tests are done to confirm the diagnosis. Biopsy is not used to diagnose HCC.

How is liver cancer treated?

Liver cancer treatments depend on the stage of the cancer (number and size of the tumors and whether it has spread). When HCC is found at an early stage, surgical removal of the tumor or a liver transplant may be options. At later stages, medicines are injected into the tumor to shrink it or stop it from growing. Sometimes, a combination of treatments may be suggested to get the best results.

How can you avoid getting liver cancer?

The best way to avoid getting liver cancer is to treat your liver well. Avoid alcohol and herbal supplements, get all needed vaccinations, and treat hepatitis B or C if you have it. Your provider may also have certain diet or medication recommendations for you. Above all, if you do have cirrhosis, then you should get radiology studies every 6 months to check your liver and find any liver cancer as early as possible if it does develop.

Resources

VA National Viral Hepatitis Program:
Liver Cancer Patient Guide

www.hepatitis.va.gov/pdf/HCC-patient-modules

American Liver Foundation
www.liverfoundation.org/

American Cancer Society
www.cancer.org/cancer/liver-cancer

National Cancer Institute:
What You Need to Know About Liver Cancer booklet
www.cancer.gov/publications/patient-education/wyntk-liver-cancer



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