



Your Liver. Your Life.

Newly Diagnosed Liver Cancer



American Liver Foundation Support Guide

©2011 American Liver Foundation. All rights reserved.

Newly Diagnosed: Liver Cancer

Learning you have liver cancer can be overwhelming. You may have a lot of questions and may wonder what the first step to take is. You are not alone. The American Liver Foundation (ALF) is here to help. ALF provides individuals who have liver disease with the resources and information they need to care for their livers. Learn as much as you can about your liver, liver cancer, and the resources available to you. Take steps forward equipped with information and support!

The American Liver Foundation's mission is to facilitate, advocate, and promote education, support, and research for the prevention, treatment, and cure of liver disease.

Table of Contents

- I. [What is Liver Cancer?](#)
- II. [Symptoms](#)
- III. [Treatment](#)
- IV. [Living with Liver Cancer](#)
- V. [Glossary](#)
- VI. [Questions to Ask Your Healthcare Provider](#)
- VII. [Resources](#)

Liver cancer

Liver cancer is the growth and spread of unhealthy cells in the liver. Cancer that starts in the liver is primary liver cancer. Cancer that starts in another organ and spreads to the liver is secondary (metastatic) liver cancer.

About 21,000 Americans are diagnosed with primary liver cancer each year. Primary liver cancer is one of the few cancers on the rise in the United States. It is about twice as common in men than in women.

Symptoms of liver cancer

Often liver cancer has no symptoms until it is in an advanced stage. When symptoms do occur, they may include fatigue, bloating, pain on the right side of the upper abdomen or back and shoulder, nausea, loss of appetite, feelings of fullness, weight loss, weakness, fever, and jaundice (yellowing of the eyes and skin).

Treatment of liver cancer

Liver cancer treatment depends on:

- the liver's condition
- the size, location, and number of tumors
- if the cancer has spread outside the liver
- the person's age and overall health

If liver cancer is diagnosed early or has not progressed, treatment options include:

- **Transplant**

If the cancer has not spread, a liver transplant (replacement of the liver) may be an option for some patients. For more information:

<http://www.liverfoundation.org/abouttheliver/info/transplant/> and
http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/livertransplant_ez/.

- **Surgery**

If the cancer has been found early and the rest of the liver is healthy, doctors may perform surgery to remove the tumor(s) from the liver (partial hepatectomy). For more information:

http://www.cancer.org/docroot/CRI/content/CRI_2_4_4X_Surgical_Resection_25.asp.

Other treatment options if surgery and transplant are not possible include:

- **Radiofrequency Ablation**
Radiofrequency ablation uses a special probe to destroy cancer cells with heat. For more information: <http://www.mayoclinic.org/radiofrequency-ablation/>.
- **Ethanol Injection**
Ethanol (alcohol) is injected directly into the liver tumor to destroy cancer cells. For more information:
http://www.medicinenet.com/percutaneous_ethanol_injection_of_liver/article.htm.
- **Chemotherapy or chemoembolization**
Chemotherapy uses drugs to destroy cancer cells. In some cases, the chemotherapy can be directly injected into the liver tumor. For more information:
http://www.cancer.org/docroot/CRI/content/CRI_2_2_4X_How_Is_Liver_Cancer_Treated_25.asp.
- **Cryosurgery**
Cryosurgery uses a metal probe to freeze and destroy cancer cells. For more information:
<http://www.cancer.gov/templates/doc.aspx?viewid=C36AF201-3CA4-4C4A-B8FC-DF5499D54F50>.
- **Radiation Therapy**
Radiation therapy uses radiation (high-energy x-rays) to destroy cancer cells. For more information:
http://www.cancer.org/docroot/CRI/content/CRI_2_4_4X_Radiation_Therapy_25.asp.
- **Sorafenib (Nexavar)**
Sorafenib is an oral medication, FDA approved for use in advanced cases of hepatocellular carcinoma (the most common type of primary liver cancer). For more information: <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/druginfo/meds/a607051.html>.

These treatments may not work for all people with liver cancer. People undergoing these treatments need to be monitored by their doctors for side effects. It is important to talk to your doctor about the right treatment for you. Also, talk to your doctor about the hepatitis A and hepatitis B vaccines.

Living with liver cancer

It is possible for people with liver cancer to live healthy, active lives. You can take steps to keep yourself healthy. Talk to your doctor about treatment options and diet recommendations.

Why is it important for people with liver cancer to be vaccinated for hepatitis A and hepatitis B?

Hepatitis A and hepatitis B can cause liver damage. Doctors recommend that individuals with liver cancer be vaccinated for hepatitis A and hepatitis B to prevent any further liver damage.

What is the hepatitis A vaccine?

The hepatitis A vaccine is a sequence of two shots, usually given six months apart, to protect the human body against the hepatitis A virus (HAV). After the vaccine is given, the body makes antibodies that protect a person against HAV. An antibody is a substance in the blood that is made by the body to fight a virus or bacteria. These antibodies are stored in the body and will fight infection if a person is exposed to HAV in the future.

What is the hepatitis B vaccine?

The hepatitis B vaccine is a sequence of three shots to protect the human body against HBV. The first two shots are given one month apart and the final shot is given 6 months later. After the vaccine is given, the body makes antibodies that protect a person against HBV. An antibody is a substance in the blood that is made by the body to fight a virus or bacteria. These antibodies are stored in the body and will fight infection if a person is exposed to HBV in the future.

What are the possible complications of liver cancer?

Possible complications of liver cancer include:

- ascites (fluid in the abdomen)
- spread of cancer to other parts of the body
- internal bleeding
- liver failure

What is the outlook for people with liver cancer?

The outlook for liver cancer varies from person to person. The prognosis for liver cancer often depends on the person's overall health, age, characteristics of the tumor, and the stage of liver cancer. Talk to your doctor for specific information related to your health.

What steps can family members take to reduce their risk of liver cancer?

Family members can take the following steps to reduce their risk of liver cancer:

- Regularly see a doctor who specializes in liver disease (hepatologist or gastroenterologist) and discuss liver health and any need for cancer screenings
- Take action to prevent liver disease:
 - Talk to a doctor about viral hepatitis prevention, including hepatitis A and hepatitis B vaccines
 - Take steps to prevent exposure to hepatitis B and hepatitis C
 - Maintain a healthy weight through eating a healthy diet and exercising regularly
 - Talk to a doctor about alcohol and liver health
 - Talk to a doctor about medicines and how they can affect the liver
 - Avoid breathing in or touching toxins

Glossary

The following is a list of liver cancer-related terms you may hear or read about:

Ascites: Ascites is the build up of fluid in the abdomen that can occur due to liver failure, cirrhosis and liver cancer.

Chemotherapy: Chemotherapy uses drugs to destroy cancer cells. In some cases, the chemotherapy can be directly injected into the liver tumor.

Cirrhosis: Cirrhosis is extensive scarring of the liver -- hard scar tissue replaces soft healthy tissue. Severe scarring of the liver can prevent the liver from working well.

Clinical trial: A clinical trial is a medical research study conducted to find answers to health questions. Clinical trials are often conducted to evaluate new medications, combinations of medications, or new ways to use current treatments. Clinical trials are also conducted to evaluate new tests, equipment, and procedures for diagnosing and detecting health conditions and to find vaccines to prevent illnesses.

Computerized tomography (CT) scan: A CT scan is an imaging method that uses x-rays to get detailed pictures of the body

Cryosurgery: Cryosurgery uses a metal probe to freeze and destroy cancer cells.

Edema: Edema is the build up of fluid in the legs that can occur due to liver failure, cirrhosis, and liver cancer.

Ethanol injection: Ethanol (alcohol) is injected directly into the liver tumor to destroy cancer cells.

Fibrosis: Fibrosis is the initial scarring of the liver.

Gastroenterologist: A gastroenterologist is a doctor who specializes in the study of digestive organs including the liver.

Hepatocellular carcinoma: Hepatocellular carcinoma is primary liver cancer (cancer that starts in the liver).

Hepatologist: A hepatologist is a doctor who specializes in the study of the liver.

Jaundice: Jaundice is the yellowing of the skin and white part of the eyes.

Liver: The liver is the second largest organ in your body. It processes what you eat and drink into energy and nutrients your body can use. The liver also removes harmful substances from your blood.

Liver biopsy: A liver biopsy is a medical procedure used to remove a small piece of liver tissue that is studied in the lab to determine the liver's condition.

Liver cancer: Liver cancer is the growth and spread of unhealthy cells in the liver.

Liver failure: Liver failure is the inability of the liver to function and perform its jobs.

Liver function tests: Liver function tests help check the liver's health and detect liver damage. These blood tests measure the levels of certain proteins and enzymes in the blood.

ALT: Alanine transaminase (ALT) is an enzyme mainly found in the liver. The ALT test measures the level of ALT in the blood. Consistently high levels of ALT can be a sign of liver swelling or injury.

AST: Aspartate transaminase (AST) is an enzyme found in large amounts in the liver and other parts of the body. The AST test measures the level of AST in the blood. High levels of AST can be a sign of liver damage.

Liver transplant: A liver transplant is the process of replacing a sick liver with a donated, healthy liver.

Metastatic liver cancer: Metastatic liver cancer is cancer that spreads to the liver from another organ.

Prognosis: Prognosis is an educated predication on what the most likely process and outcome of a disease is.

Primary liver cancer: Primary liver cancer is cancer that starts in the liver.

Radiation therapy: Radiation therapy uses radiation (high-energy x-rays) to destroy cancer cells.

Radiofrequency ablation: Radiofrequency ablation uses a special probe to destroy cancer cells with heat.

Tumor: A tumor is an abnormal growth of cells in a lump.

Ultrasound: An ultrasound is an imaging technique that uses waves to get inside views of the body.

Vaccine: A vaccine is a medication that stimulates the production of antibodies to protect against a specific disease.

Questions to Ask Your Healthcare Provider

Having a list of questions to ask a healthcare provider during an appointment can be a helpful tool to remember the important questions to ask. Be sure to bring a pen, this sheet and the notes pages at the end of the guide, or other device (notebook, phone) to write down the answers.

1. What type of liver cancer do I have (primary or metastatic)?
2. Do I have liver damage? If so, how much liver damage is there?
3. Do I have cirrhosis (scarring of the liver)?
4. What treatment do you recommend? What do I need to know about my treatment?
5. Do I need to start treatment for liver cancer now?
6. How will this treatment interact with my other medications?
7. How will you assess whether the treatment is working for me?
8. What should I do if I have side effects? How can I manage the side effects?
9. If I do not start treatment now, how often should my liver be monitored for liver damage?
10. What are symptoms to pay attention to and look out for?
11. What medications or other substances should I avoid?
12. Do I need to be vaccinated for hepatitis A and hepatitis B?
13. How often should I see a liver specialist? Primary care physician? Do I need to see an oncologist (cancer specialist)?

Resources

The following is a list of resources you might find helpful:

Liver Cancer Information

- American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases:
<http://www.aasld.org/patients/Pages/default.aspx>
Phone: 703-299-9766
- American Cancer Society:
http://www.cancer.org/docroot/cric/content/cric_2_2_1x_what_is_liver_cancer_25.asp
Phone: 800-227-2345
- American Liver Foundation:
<http://www.liverfoundation.org/abouttheliver/info/livercancer/>
Phone: 800-465-4837 (800-GO-LIVER)
- American Society of Clinical Oncology:
<http://www.cancer.net/patient/Cancer+Types/Liver+Cancer>
Phone: 888-282-2552
- Mayo Clinic: <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/liver-cancer/ds00399>
- National Cancer Institute: <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/wyntk/liver>
Phone: 800-422-6237 (800-4-CANCER)

Medical Referrals

- American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases:
<http://www.aasld.org/patients/Pages/PhysicianReferralService.aspx>
- American College of Gastroenterology: <http://www.acg.gi.org/patients/phylocator.asp>
Phone: 301-263-9000
- American Liver Foundation: <http://www.liverfoundation.org/chapters/>
Phone: 800-465-4837 (800-GO-LIVER)
- Hepatitis B Foundation: http://www.hepb.org/resources/liver_specialist_directory.htm
Phone: 215-489-4900
- Hepatitis Foundation International:
http://www.hepfi.org/support/support_physician.html
Phone: 800-891-0707
- Medicare: <http://www.medicare.gov/find-a-doctor/provider-search.aspx>
Phone: 800-633-4227 (800-MEDICARE) TTY/TDD: 877-486-2048

Medication Assistance Programs

- Chronic Disease Fund: <http://www.cdfund.org/>
Phone: 877-968-7233
- Healthwell Foundation: <http://www.healthwellfoundation.org/>
Phone: 800-675-8416
- Needy Meds: <http://www.needymeds.org/>
- Partnership for Prescription Assistance: <http://www.pparx.org/>
Phone: 888-477-2669 (888-4PPA-NOW)
- Patient Access Network Foundation: <https://www.panfoundation.org/>
Phone: 866-316-7263
- Together Rx Access: <http://www.togetherrxaccess.com/Tx/jsp/home.jsp>
Phone: 800-444-4106

ALF Support Services

- National helpline: 800-465-4837 (800-GO-LIVER)
- Support guides: <http://www.liverfoundation.org/>
- Resource referrals: 800-465-4837 (800-GO-LIVER)
- Online support communities: <http://www.liverfoundation.org/>

Clinical Trials

- National Cancer Institute: <http://www.cancer.gov/clinicaltrials>
Phone: 800-422-6237 (800-4-CANCER)
- NIH liver cancer clinical trials: <http://clinicaltrials.gov/ct2/results?term=liver+cancer>

Research

- NIH PubMed liver cancer search: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/sites/entrez>

Notes

Notes