

Liver Cancer



Your Liver. Your Life.

Why is the liver important?

The liver is the largest solid organ in your body and is located under your rib cage on the right side. It weighs about three pounds and is shaped like a football that is flat on one side.

The liver performs many jobs in your body. It processes what you eat and drink into energy and nutrients that it stores for your body to use. The liver also removes harmful substances from your blood.

What is liver cancer?

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

About 30,000 Americans are diagnosed with primary liver cancer each year. Primary liver cancer is one of the cancers on the rise in the United States. Primary liver cancer is about twice as common in men than in women.

What causes liver cancer?

There are several risk factors for liver cancer:

- Hepatitis B and long-term hepatitis C infection are linked to liver cancer because they often lead to cirrhosis. Hepatitis B can lead to liver cancer without cirrhosis.

- Excessive alcohol use.
- Obesity and diabetes are closely associated with a type of liver abnormality called nonalcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) that may increase the risk of liver cancer, especially in those who drink heavily or have viral hepatitis.
- Certain inherited metabolic diseases.
- Environmental exposure to aflatoxins.

What are the symptoms of liver cancer?

Symptoms 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 the skin).

How is liver cancer diagnosed?

A physical examination or imaging tests may suggest liver cancer. To confirm a diagnosis, doctors may use blood tests, ultrasound tests, computed tomography (CT) scans, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), and angiograms. You may also need to have a liver biopsy, especially if there is no intent to surgically remove the cancer. During a biopsy, a small piece of liver tissue is removed and studied in the lab.

How is liver cancer treated?

Liver cancer treatment depends on:

- The liver's condition and extent of cirrhosis

- The size, location and number of tumors
- If the cancer has spread outside the liver
- The person's overall health

Treatment options if the cancer has not spread and the rest of the liver is healthy are:

- Transplant if the cancer has not spread, for some patients a liver transplant (replacement of the liver) may be an option.
- Surgery If the cancer has been found early and the rest of the liver is healthy, doctors may perform surgery to remove the tumor from the liver (partial hepatectomy).
- Radiofrequency Ablation Radiofrequency ablation uses a special probe to destroy cancer cells with heat.

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

For cancer that has not spread outside the liver:

- Cryosurgery uses a metal probe to freeze and destroy cancer cells.
- Bland embolization or chemoembolization are procedures in which the blood supply to the tumor is blocked, after giving anticancer drugs (chemoembolization) and one without (bland embolization). Both are given in blood vessels near the tumor.
- Radiation therapy Radiation therapy uses radiation (high-energy x-rays) to destroy cancer cells.

For cancer that has spread outside the liver:

- Oral anti-cancer medication is available for use in some cases of hepatocellular carcinoma (the most common type of primary liver cancer).
- Clinical trials may be an option for some patients.
- Talk to your doctor about other options that may be available.

What is the outlook for patients with liver cancer?

A successful liver transplant will effectively cure liver cancer, but it is an option for only a small percentage of patients. Surgical resections are successful in only about one out of three cases. However, scientists are experimenting with several promising new drugs and therapies that could help prolong the lives of people with liver cancer.

What is the best way to reduce the risk of liver cancer?

Steps to reduce the risk of liver cancer include:

- Regularly see a doctor who specializes in liver disease
- Talk to your doctor about viral hepatitis prevention, including hepatitis B vaccinations
- Take steps to prevent exposure to hepatitis B and hepatitis C.
- Treatment for hepatitis B and C
- If you have cirrhosis or chronic

liver disease, follow your doctor's recommendations for treatment and be screened regularly for liver cancer

- If you are overweight or obese, diabetic, or drink heavily, talk to your doctor



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American Liver Foundation

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