

Liver Cancer

What to look for...

Like most cancers, liver cancer usually has no initial symptoms, but may eventually cause:

- Pain, swelling, or tenderness in the upper right section of the abdomen.
- Jaundice.
- Body itching.
- Swollen legs.

In the advanced stage, symptoms may also include fever, appetite and weight loss, nausea, vomiting, fatigue, general weakness, and loss of libido.

The liver's job is to filter the circulating blood. It converts nutrients and drugs absorbed in the digestive tract into chemicals that the body can use straight away. Another job it has is to remove toxins and other chemical waste products from the blood and gets them ready for excretion. All the blood in the body must pass through the liver, therefore, it is very accessible to cancer cells travelling in the bloodstream. Unfortunately, the liver cannot cleanse itself of cancer.

Very rarely does cancer start in the liver, normally liver cancer is secondary, (meaning the tumour originated elsewhere in the body).

Causes

When primary liver cancer does occur, it tends to result from livers damaged by congenital defects or diseases such as [hepatitis B and C](#), and cirrhosis. In fact, most people told they have primary liver cancer already have cirrhosis.

There are some carcinogens which are linked with primary liver cancer, these are some cholesterol-lowering drugs, herbicides, and other chemicals such as vinyl chloride and arsenic.

If you believe you are in a high risk group, it is wise to speak with your doctor who may perform a liver test on you.

Traditional Treatments

Liver cancer is not easy to treat or to cure. Primary liver cancer is not usually detected early, when it is most treatable and secondary liver cancer has already spread so it is also difficult to treat. Most therapy centres on improving the patient's quality and length of life.

If the tumour is caught early enough, surgery may be possible and this is the patient's best chance of being cured. Unfortunately, when most cancers are diagnosed it is almost too late, either the cancer has spread too much or the liver is too badly diseased to be saved.

Radiation or chemotherapy can often be used to reduce the size of the tumours to a size which is able to be operated on. Patients in remission must be monitored closely in case of a recurrence.

Complementary Therapies

Complementary therapies that may help relieve some of the pain include massage, relaxation techniques, hypnotherapy, and acupuncture.

Prevention

- Get [immunised](#) against hepatitis B.
- Only drink alcohol in moderation.
- Before taking [iron](#) supplements, check with a doctor to make sure you really need them as overdosing on these has been linked to liver cancer.
- Do not use anabolic steroids unless medically necessary.

When to seek further professional advice

- You develop symptoms that suggest liver cancer.