

About Gallbladder Cancer - A Quick Guide



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This is a brief summary of the information on 'About gallbladder cancer' from CancerHelp UK. You will find more detailed information on the website.

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About the gallbladder

The gallbladder is a small, hollow, pear-shaped pouch in your body. It lies underneath the right side of your liver, in your upper abdomen. The main purpose of the gallbladder is to concentrate and store your bile. Bile is a fluid made in the liver that helps you to digest fats in your small bowel (intestine). It is made from cholesterol, water, bilirubin and bile salts. Bilirubin is what gives bile its greenish colour.

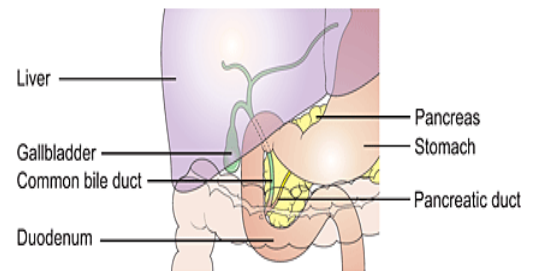


Diagram showing the anatomy of the gallbladder
© CancerHelp UK

Your gallbladder is not an essential part of your body. You can live without it. So after having it taken out, you are still able to digest your food.

The lymph nodes

Like all other parts of the body, the area containing the gallbladder also contains lymph nodes. You may hear these called lymph glands. They are small bean shaped glands that are part of the lymphatic system.

Removing and checking lymph nodes is part of staging the cancer. The stage of a cancer is important because it helps doctors to decide the most suitable treatment.



Gallbladder cancer risks and causes

How common is gallbladder cancer?

Gallbladder cancer is a rare cancer in the UK. Gallbladder is more common in women than in men. About 7 out of every 10 cases diagnosed are in women. It is more common in older people.

Genetic factors and medical history

The most common risk factor for gallbladder cancer is having gallstones and inflammation of the gallbladder (cholecystitis). Having a first degree relative with gallbladder cancer increases your risk. Some rare abnormalities of the gallbladder that you are born with and having non cancerous growths called gallbladder polyps can also increase risk.

Lifestyle factors

There are some lifestyle risk factors such as being overweight, smoking or working in the metal or rubber industry.

Gallbladder cancer symptoms

Gallbladder cancer does not usually cause symptoms in its early stages. So by the time you and your doctor know it is there, it may be at a more advanced stage than some other types of cancer. The most common symptoms of gallbladder cancer can include

- Abdominal pain on your right side
- Feeling or being sick
- Jaundice

Symptoms of jaundice can include yellowing skin and whites of the eyes, severe itching,

darkened urine and pale coloured bowel movements.

Gallbladder enlargement

If your bile duct has a blockage, your gallbladder will fill up with bile and become swollen and enlarged. Your doctor may be able to feel this during a physical examination but is more likely to see it on ultrasound scan.

Other, less common, symptoms of gallbladder cancer are loss of appetite (anorexia), loss of weight without dieting, and swollen abdomen (tummy).

Remember, other diseases apart from gallbladder cancer can cause these symptoms. Even so, it is important to see your doctor if you have any of these symptoms.

Screening for gallbladder cancer

Screening means testing for early stages of a disease before there are any symptoms.

Before doctors can screen for any type of cancer, they must have an accurate test to use. The test must be reliable in picking up cancers that are there. And it must not give false positive results in people who do not have cancer. At the moment there is no reliable screening test for gallbladder cancer.

If you think you are at higher than average risk for gallbladder cancer, talk to your doctor. You may be able to have regular check ups.

It is very important to see your doctor if you develop any gallbladder symptoms. This is the best way of finding gallbladder cancer



in its earliest stages, when it is most treatable.

Types of gallbladder cancer

Over 85 out of every 100 gallbladder cancers are adenocarcinomas. This cancer starts in gland cells in the gallbladder lining. These cells produce mucus (thick fluid). There are three types of gallbladder adenocarcinomas

- non papillary adenocarcinoma
- papillary adenocarcinoma
- mucinous adenocarcinoma

Less common cancers

Less common cancers of the gallbladder include

- Squamous cell cancer
- Adenosquamous cancer of the gallbladder
- Small cell cancer of the gallbladder
- Gallbladder sarcomas

Doctors treat squamous cell gallbladder cancer and adenosquamous gallbladder cancer in the same way as adenocarcinomas.

Rare cancers

Rare gallbladder cancers include neuroendocrine cancers, lymphoma and melanoma. These cancers will not necessarily be treated in the same way as the other gallbladder cancers covered in this document.

Guidelines for seeing a gallbladder cancer specialist

It can be very difficult for GPs to decide who may have a suspected cancer and who has something much less serious. But there are particular symptoms that mean your GP

should refer you to a specialist straight away. The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) says that the following symptoms need an urgent referral to a specialist.

- Unexplained abdominal pain and weight loss, with or without back pain
- A lump in your upper abdomen
- Feeling and being sick continuously, and losing weight
- Jaundice (yellowing skin) caused by a blockage

You should ideally get an appointment within 2 weeks for an urgent referral.

If you have symptoms and you do not think your GP is taking them seriously enough, you could take this information to your appointment. You may be able to decide together whether you need to see a specialist, and how soon.

What to ask your doctor about gallbladder cancer

- How will I know if I have gallbladder cancer?
- I have had gallstones. Does this increase my risk of gallbladder cancer?
- Will my diet, drinking or smoking habits increase my risk of gallbladder cancer?
- What are the risk factors of gallbladder cancer?
- What are the symptoms of gallbladder cancer?
- What type of gallbladder cancer do I have?
- Can I be screened for gallbladder cancer?
- My mother had gallbladder cancer. Does this mean I am more likely to get it?



Notes

More information

For more information about gallbladder cancer, visit our website
<http://cancerhelp.cancerresearchuk.org>

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 cancer trials in the UK. You can view or print the information in a larger size if you need to.

For answers to your questions about cancer call our Cancer Information Nurses on **0808 800 4040** 9am till 5pm Monday to Friday

Adapted from Cancer Research UK's Patient Information Website CancerHelp UK in March 2011. CancerHelp UK is not designed to provide medical advice or professional services and is intended to be for educational use only. The information provided through CancerHelp UK and our nurse team is not a substitute for professional care and should not be used for diagnosing or treating a health problem or disease. If you have, or suspect you may have, a health problem you should consult your doctor. © Cancer Research UK 2011. Cancer Research UK is a registered charity in England and Wales (1089464) and in Scotland (SC041666).