

About Liver Cancer - A Quick Guide



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

In this information there are sections on

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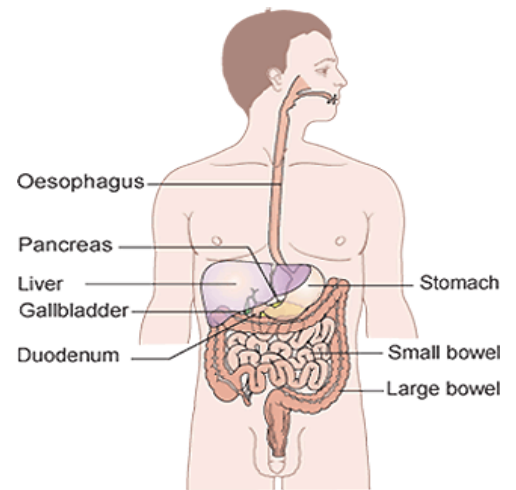


Diagram showing the parts of the digestive system
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The liver

The liver is the second largest organ in the body after the skin. It is found below your right lung and is protected by the lower ribs on that side. The liver is divided into two main lobes, called the right and left lobes. Each of these lobes is divided into further segments.

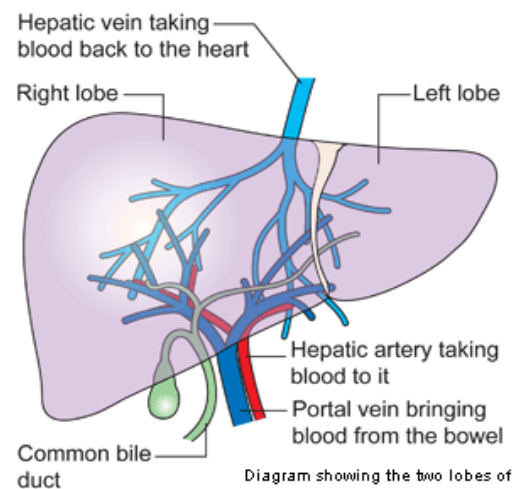


Diagram showing the two lobes of the liver and its blood supply
Copyright © CancerHelp UK



The liver is the chemical factory of the body. It performs many important jobs including

- Storing some nutrients
- Converting fats to energy when the body needs it
- Producing bile - a substance that helps the digestion and absorption of food
- Making proteins
- Helping the blood to clot
- Making other substances the body needs
- Breaking down harmful substances including alcohol, many drugs and waste products from normal body processes

Liver cancer risks and causes

Primary liver cancer is relatively rare. It is more common in men than in women. About 1 in every 100 cancers diagnosed in the UK is a primary liver cancer.

Anything that increases your risk of getting a disease is a risk factor. Risk factors for liver cancer include scarring of the liver due to previous damage (cirrhosis), infection with hepatitis viruses, taking anabolic steroids, having a family history of liver cancer, and smoking. People who are infected with hepatitis B or C have a higher risk of liver cancer if they smoke.

Other possible risk factors include arsenic, which is a poison found in the drinking water of some developing countries, having diabetes, being overweight, having a lowered immunity, and taking some types of the contraceptive pill.

Symptoms of liver cancer

The symptoms of primary liver cancer can include

- Significant loss of weight that cannot be explained
- Loss of appetite over a period of a few weeks
- Being sick
- Feeling full or bloated after eating, even after a small meal
- Pain or discomfort in the tummy (abdomen)
- A swollen tummy (abdomen)
- Yellowish skin (jaundice), dark coloured urine and pale coloured faeces
- Itching
- A sudden worsening of health in somebody with known chronic hepatitis or cirrhosis
- A high temperature and sweating

Many of these symptoms are vague. All can be caused by other conditions such as infection. But if you have any of these symptoms you should see your doctor.

Screening for liver 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 screening test that is reliable enough to use for primary liver cancer across the whole population.

For any rare cancer, it is most cost effective to screen people who have a higher risk of developing that cancer. We know there



are some groups of people that are at higher risk of liver cancer. If you have established cirrhosis (liver damage), your doctor may suggest you are tested every 6 months.

Types of liver cancer

Primary and secondary cancer

Cancers are named after their original cell type, from the organ where the cancer first begins to grow. Cancer cells can break away from the primary site and travel to other parts of the body. This is called a secondary cancer. But the cells are still the same type – that of the primary cancer. This is important because cancers are treated according to the original cell type.

In the UK, nearly all cancer found in the liver is secondary cancer. If you have had cancer elsewhere before you developed cancer in your liver, this is not the right information for you. You need to look at the section of CancerHelp UK for your type of primary cancer.

Hepatocellular carcinoma

This is the most common type of primary liver cancer. 85 out of every 100 primary liver cancers (85%) diagnosed are this type. It is much more likely to develop in men than women. It also becomes more common with increasing age.

Other types of liver types

Other types of liver cancer include cholangiocarcinoma, which starts in the cells that line the bile duct, angiosarcoma (or haemangiosarcoma), which starts in the blood vessels of the liver, and hepatoblastoma which is very rare and usually affects young children.

Should I see a liver 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
- Swelling of your upper abdomen (tummy)
- 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 print out this page and take it 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 liver cancer

- How would I know if I had primary liver cancer?
- A member of my family has liver cancer – am I at risk of getting it myself?
- Can you explain to me the difference between a primary and secondary liver cancer?
- Is liver cancer more likely to be caused by spread from another cancer?
- How common is primary liver cancer?
- Does drinking alcohol increase liver cancer risk?
- As I've had cirrhosis, does this increase my liver cancer risk?
- Should I be screened?
- What screening tests are available?
- Are my children more at risk if I have primary liver cancer?
- Is there anything I can do to reduce my risk of primary liver cancer?

More information

For more information about liver 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 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 July 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).