

# ASCO ANSWERS

## LIVER CANCER

### WHAT IS LIVER CANCER?

Primary liver cancer is cancer that begins in the liver. About 90% of primary liver cancer is hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC). Other subtypes of primary liver cancer include bile duct cancer and angiosarcoma, a cancer of the blood vessels in the liver. Liver cancer is the fifth most common cause of cancer death among men and the ninth among women, though it is less common in the United States than it is in other parts of the world.

### WHAT IS THE FUNCTION OF THE LIVER?

The liver is the largest internal organ in the body and is vital to the digestion of food. No one can survive without a liver. The liver performs many functions, including collecting and filtering blood from the intestines, removing toxic wastes from the body, storing energy, and making proteins.

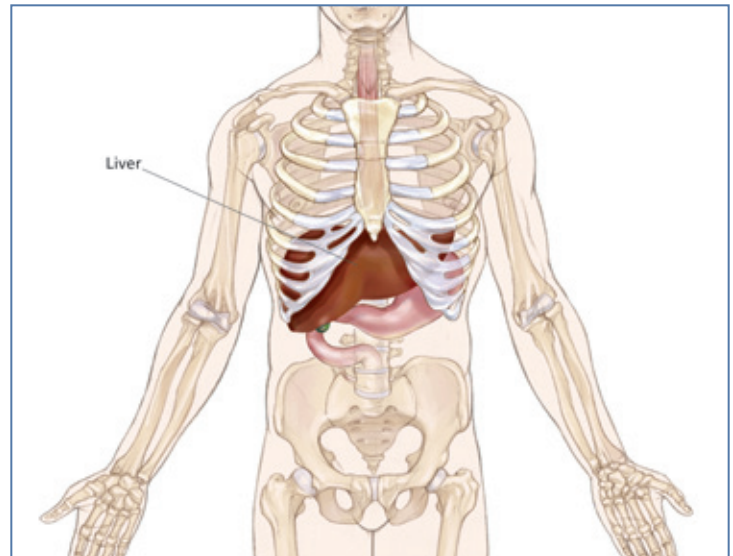


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*Find additional cancer information at [www.cancer.net](http://www.cancer.net).*

### WHAT DOES STAGE MEAN?

The stage is a way of describing the cancer, such as where it is located, if or where it has spread, and whether it is affecting the functions of other organs in the body. There are four stages for liver cancer: stages I through IV (one through four). Complete details on these stages are available at [www.cancer.net/liver](http://www.cancer.net/liver).

### HOW IS LIVER CANCER TREATED?

The treatment of HCC depends on the size and location of the tumor, whether the cancer has spread, whether it can be removed with surgery, and the person's overall health. Treatment also depends on liver function, as people who develop liver cancer may have liver damage related to infection (viral hepatitis) or exposure to chemicals (alcohol and some industrial solvents). Surgery to remove the tumor is likely to be the most successful treatment option, particularly for tumors smaller than 5 centimeters (about 2 inches). Other options for tumors this size include radiofrequency ablation (use of heat), cryosurgery (use of extreme cold), and percutaneous ethanol injection (use of alcohol injected directly into the liver tumor to kill cancer cells). A liver transplantation, radiation therapy, and chemotherapy may also be used to treat HCC. A drug called sorafenib (Nexavar) is the standard treatment for patients with advanced liver cancer. When making treatment decisions, people may also consider a clinical trial; talk with your doctor about all treatment options and the goals of each treatment. The side effects of liver cancer treatment can often be prevented or managed with the help of your health care team.

### HOW CAN I COPE WITH LIVER CANCER?

Absorbing the news of a cancer diagnosis and communicating with your doctor are key parts of the coping process. Seeking support, becoming organized, and considering a second opinion are additional steps to take. Take care of yourself during this time. Understanding your emotions and those of people close to you can be helpful in managing the diagnosis, treatment, and healing process.

## QUESTIONS TO ASK THE DOCTOR

Regular communication is important in making informed decisions about your health care. Consider asking the following questions of your doctors:

- What type of liver cancer do I have?
- Am I a carrier of hepatitis B or C? What does this mean?
- Do I have cirrhosis of the liver? What does this mean?
- Can you explain my pathology report (laboratory test results) to me?
- What stage is the liver cancer?
- Can the tumor be removed surgically?
- Would you explain my treatment options? What clinical trials are open to me?
- What treatment plan do you recommend? Why?
- Who will be part of my treatment team, and what does each member do?
- What is the goal of each treatment?
- How will this treatment affect my daily life? Will I be able to work, exercise, and perform my usual activities?



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liver cancer

- If I'm worried about managing the costs related to my cancer care, who can help me with these concerns?
- What long-term side effects may be associated with my cancer treatment?
- Where can I find emotional support for me and my family?
- Whom do I call for questions or problems?

Additional questions to ask the doctor can be found at [www.cancer.net/liver](http://www.cancer.net/liver).

**Cancer.Net**™

Doctor-Approved Patient Information from ASCO®

**For more information, visit ASCO's patient website, [www.cancer.net](http://www.cancer.net), or call 888-651-3038.**

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## TERMS TO KNOW

### Benign:

A tumor that is not cancerous

### Biopsy:

Removal of a tissue sample that is then examined under a microscope to check for cancer cells

### Cirrhosis:

Scarring of the liver, due to injury or long-term disease

### Chemotherapy:

The use of drugs to destroy cancer cells

### Hepatectomy:

Removal of the cancerous part of the liver

### Lymph node:

A tiny, bean-shaped organ that fights infection

### Malignant:

A tumor that is cancerous

### Metastasis:

The spread of cancer from where the cancer began to another part of the body

### Oncologist:

A doctor who specializes in treating people with cancer

### Prognosis:

Chance of recovery

### Radiation therapy:

The use of high-energy x-rays to destroy cancer cells

### Tumor:

An abnormal growth of body tissue

### Viral hepatitis:

Inflammation of the liver caused by a virus