

ASCO ANSWERS

LIVER CANCER

WHAT IS LIVER CANCER?

Primary liver cancer is cancer that begins in the liver. It is common for the liver to be the site of spreading from other cancers. 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 sixth most common cause of cancer death among men in the world, though it is less common in the United States.

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.

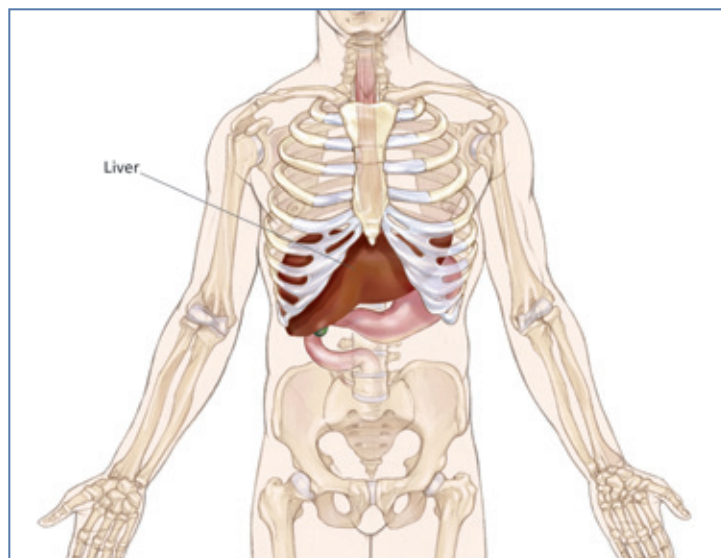


Illustration by Robert Morale/Visual Explanations, LLC. © 2004 American Society of Clinical Oncology.

Find additional cancer information at 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 if 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).

HOW IS LIVER CANCER TREATED?

The treatment of HCC depends on the size and location of the tumor, whether the cancer has spread or 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). For small tumors, surgery to remove the tumor may be the most successful treatment option. A liver transplantation, radiation therapy, and chemotherapy may also be used to treat HCC. 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) are treatment options for cancer that cannot be treated with surgery, chemotherapy, or radiation therapy. A drug called sorafenib (Nexavar) improves survival for some patients with advanced liver cancer. When making treatment decisions, people may also consider a clinical trial; talk with your doctor about all treatment options. 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?
- Has cancer spread to my lymph nodes or anywhere else?
- Would you explain my treatment options?
- What clinical trials are open to me?
- How will this treatment benefit me?
- How will this treatment affect my daily life? Will I be able to work, exercise, and perform my usual activities?
- Will this treatment affect my ability to become pregnant or have children?
- What is the expected timeline for my treatment plan?
- 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?
- Is there anything else I should be asking?

Additional questions to ask the doctor can be found at www.cancer.net/liver.

Information in ASCO's patient education materials is not intended as medical advice or as a substitute for the treating doctor's own professional judgment; nor does it imply ASCO endorsement of any product, service, or company.

ASCO believes that all treatment decisions should be made between patients and their doctors.

**For more information, visit ASCO's patient website,
www.cancer.net, or call 888-651-3038.**

CancerNet™

Making a world of difference in cancer care

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 affected 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:

A mass of tissue that requires a biopsy

Viral hepatitis:

Inflammation of the liver caused by a virus