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Bile Duct Cancer - Symptoms and Signs [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the Cancer.Net Editorial Board [2], 07/2013

ON THIS PAGE: You will find out more about body changes and other things that can signal a problem that may need medical care. To see other pages, use the menu on the side of your screen.

People with bile duct cancer may experience the following symptoms or signs, usually because the tumor is blocking the bile duct. Sometimes, people with bile duct cancer do not show any of these symptoms. Or, these symptoms may be caused by a medical condition that is not cancer. If you are concerned about a symptom or sign on this list, please talk with your doctor.

One common symptom is jaundice, which is a yellowing of the skin and the whites of the eyes. When the bile duct is blocked, the liver cannot excrete bile, and the bile backs up into the bloodstream. (The blockage may not be cancer; it can also be caused by a gallstone or scar tissue.) Bile contains bilirubin, which is dark yellow and can cause the skin and whites of the eyes to turn yellow if there are higher levels of it in the bloodstream. A person?s urine may also become a dark color, and bowel movements may become pale.

However, it is important to note that jaundice is a common symptom for many conditions so there can be many causes. Your doctor may need to do several diagnostic tests (see the Diagnosis [3] section for a complete list) to find the exact cause. Many diseases associated with jaundice are not serious or life threatening, and bile duct cancer is one of the less common causes.

In addition to jaundice, other symptoms of bile duct cancer include:

- Itching, caused by a buildup of bile salts and bilirubin in the body that is then deposited in the skin
- Weight loss
- Loss of appetite
- Fever
- Abdominal pain. Early bile duct cancer usually does not cause pain, but a person may experience pain if the cancer has spread.

Your doctor will ask you questions about the symptoms you are experiencing to help find out the cause of the problem, called a diagnosis [3]. This may include how long you?ve been experiencing the symptom(s) and how often.

If cancer is diagnosed, relieving symptoms and side effects remains an important part of cancer care and treatment. This may also be called symptom management, palliative care, or supportive care. Be sure to talk with your health care team about symptoms you experience, including any new symptoms or a change in symptoms.

The next section helps explain what tests and scans may be needed to learn more about the cause of the symptoms. Use the menu on the side of your screen to select Diagnosis, or you can select another section, to continue reading this guide.

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/cancer-types/bile-duct-cancer/symptoms-and-signs
[2] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/18510