Liver Cancer - Overview [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the Cancer.Net Editorial Board [2], 03/2015

ON THIS PAGE: You will find some basic information about this disease and the parts of the body it may affect. This is the first page of Cancer.Net?s Guide to Liver Cancer. To see other pages, use the menu on the side of your screen. Think of that menu as a roadmap to this full guide.

About the liver

The liver is the largest internal organ in the body. It is essential for the digestion of food. No one can survive without a liver. Functions of the liver include:

- Collecting and filtering blood from the intestines
- Processing and storing needed nutrients absorbed by the intestines
- Converting some nutrients into energy or into substances needed to repair and build tissue
- Producing some of the body?s blood clotting factors
- Removing toxins from the body
- Helping maintain the proper sugar level in the body

About liver cancer

Cancer begins when healthy cells change and grow uncontrollably, forming a mass called a tumor. A tumor can be cancerous or benign. A cancerous tumor is malignant, meaning it can grow and spread to other parts of the body. A benign tumor means the tumor can grow but will not spread.

It is more common for cancer that started in another part of the body to spread to the liver. This is not liver cancer, but rather metastatic cancer of another organ. For instance, pancreatic, colon, stomach, breast, lung, or other cancer that has spread to the liver is still named according to the organ in which it started. For more information about cancer that started in another part of the body and has spread to the liver, read about that specific cancer type [3].

This section only covers information about cancer that begins in the liver, also known as primary liver cancer.

Types of adult primary liver cancer

There are a number of types of adult primary liver cancer. They are named for the type of cell from which the cancer develops.

Type of Liver Cancer	Description	How Common
Hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC)	Hepatocellular carcinoma can have different growth patterns. Some spread tentacle-like growths through the liver. This pattern is the most common one in the United States. Some start as a single tumor that spreads to other parts of the liver as the disease develops. Others develop as nodules at several different places in the liver. Occasionally, a pattern isn't clear.	Approximately 80% of adult primary liver cancers are hepatocellular carcinomas.
Cholangiocarcinoma, also called bile duct cancer [4]	A cholangiocarcinoma develops from cells in the bile duct of the liver. The bile duct is a thin tube that extends from the liver to the small intestine. The bile duct starts inside the liver as several smaller tubes that join together.	About 10% to 20% of adult primary liver cancers are cholangiocarcinomas.
Angiosarcoma [5]	Angiosarcoma starts in the blood vessels of the liver and grows very quickly.	About 1% of adult primary liver cancers are angiosarcomas.

The remainder of this section discusses the most common type of adult primary liver cancer, hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC). For information about bile duct cancer and angiosarcoma, use the links in the chart above.

Looking for more of an overview?

If you would like additional introductory information, explore these related items. Please note these links will take you to other sections on Cancer.Net:

- ***ASCO Answers* Fact Sheet** [6]: Read a one-page fact sheet (available as a PDF) that offers an easy-to-print introduction to this type of cancer.
- **Cancer.Net En Español** [7]: Read about liver cancer in Spanish. Infórmase sobre cáncer de hígado [8] en español.

The next section in this guide is Statistics [9], *and it helps explain how many people are diagnosed with this disease and general survival rates. Or, use the menu on the side of your screen to choose another section to continue reading this guide.*

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/cancer-types/liver-cancer/overview
[2] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[3] http://www.cancer.net/cancer-types

[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/31332
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/31379
[6] http://www.cancer.net/sites/cancer.net/files/asco_answers_liver.pdf
[7] http://www.cancer.net/es
[8] http://www.cancer.net/es/node/31363
[9] http://www.cancer.net/node/19135