

## Liver Cancer

### What is liver cancer?

Cancer begins when healthy cells change and grow out of control, 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 can grow but will not spread. Primary liver cancer is cancer that begins in the liver. About 80% 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.

### What is the function of the liver?

The liver is the largest internal organ in the body and is essential for digesting food. The liver performs many other functions, including collecting and filtering blood from the intestines, removing toxic wastes from the body, storing energy, and making proteins. No one can live without a liver.

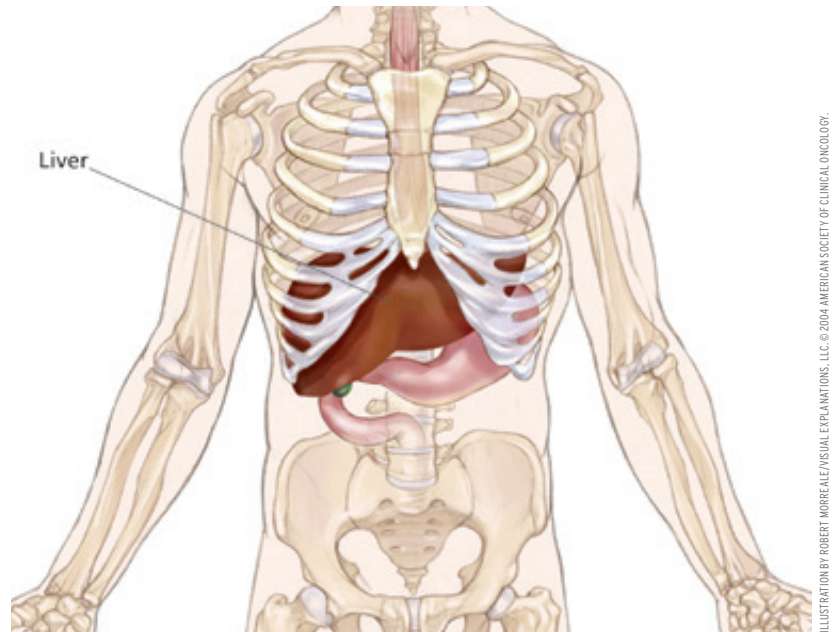


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### What does stage mean?

The stage is a way of describing where the cancer is located, if or where it has spread, and whether it is affecting other parts of the body. Doctors also consider liver function when determining the cancer's stage. There are 4 stages for HCC: very early stage, early stage, intermediate stage, and advanced stage. Find more information about these stages at [www.cancer.net/liver](http://www.cancer.net/liver).

### How is liver cancer treated?

The treatment of HCC depends on the size of the tumor, whether the cancer has spread, whether the tumor 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), exposure to chemicals (alcohol and some industrial solvents), or fat buildup caused by obesity. Surgery to remove the tumor is likely to be the most successful treatment option, particularly for a tumor smaller than 5 centimeters (about 2 inches). Other options to eliminate a tumor are liver transplantation; thermal ablation, which uses heat to destroy cancer cells; percutaneous ethanol injection, which uses alcohol injected directly into the liver tumor to destroy cancer cells; and radiation therapy. Targeted therapy and injecting chemotherapy into the liver, called chemoembolization, may also be used to treat HCC. 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. This is called palliative care and is an important part of the overall treatment plan.

### How can I cope with liver cancer?

Absorbing the news of a cancer diagnosis and communicating with your health care team are key parts of the coping process. Seeking support, organizing your health information, making sure all of your questions are answered, and participating in the decision-making process are other steps. Talk with your health care team about any concerns. Understanding your emotions and those of people close to you can be helpful in managing the diagnosis, treatment, and healing process.

**ASCO ANSWERS** is a collection of oncologist-approved patient education materials developed by the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) for people with cancer and their caregivers.

## Questions to ask the doctor

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

- What type of liver cancer do I have?
- Am I a carrier of the hepatitis B or C virus? What does this mean?
- Do I have cirrhosis of the liver? What does this mean?
- Do I have nonalcoholic fatty liver disease? What does this mean?
- Can you explain my pathology report (laboratory test results) to me?
- What stage is the liver cancer? What does this mean?
- Can the tumor be removed surgically?
- Would you explain my treatment options?
- What clinical trials are available for me? Where are they located, and how do I find out more about them?
- What treatment plan do you recommend? Why?
- What is the goal of each treatment? Is it to eliminate the cancer, help me feel better, or both?
- Who will be part of my treatment team, and what does each member do?
- How will this treatment affect my daily life? Will I be able to work, exercise, and perform my usual activities?
- What long-term side effects may be associated with my cancer treatment?
- If I'm worried about managing the costs of my cancer care, who can help me?
- Where can I find emotional support for me and my family?
- Whom should I call with questions or problems?
- Is there anything else I should be asking?

Find more questions to ask the doctor at [www.cancer.net/liver](http://www.cancer.net/liver).

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[www.asco.org](http://www.asco.org) | [www.cancer.net](http://www.cancer.net) | [www.conquercancerfoundation.org](http://www.conquercancerfoundation.org)

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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 damage or long-term disease

### Chemotherapy:

The use of drugs to destroy cancer cells

### Hepatectomy:

Surgical 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 it began to another part of the body

### Oncologist:

A doctor who specializes in treating 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

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