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**EASY READING**

# If You Have Liver Cancer

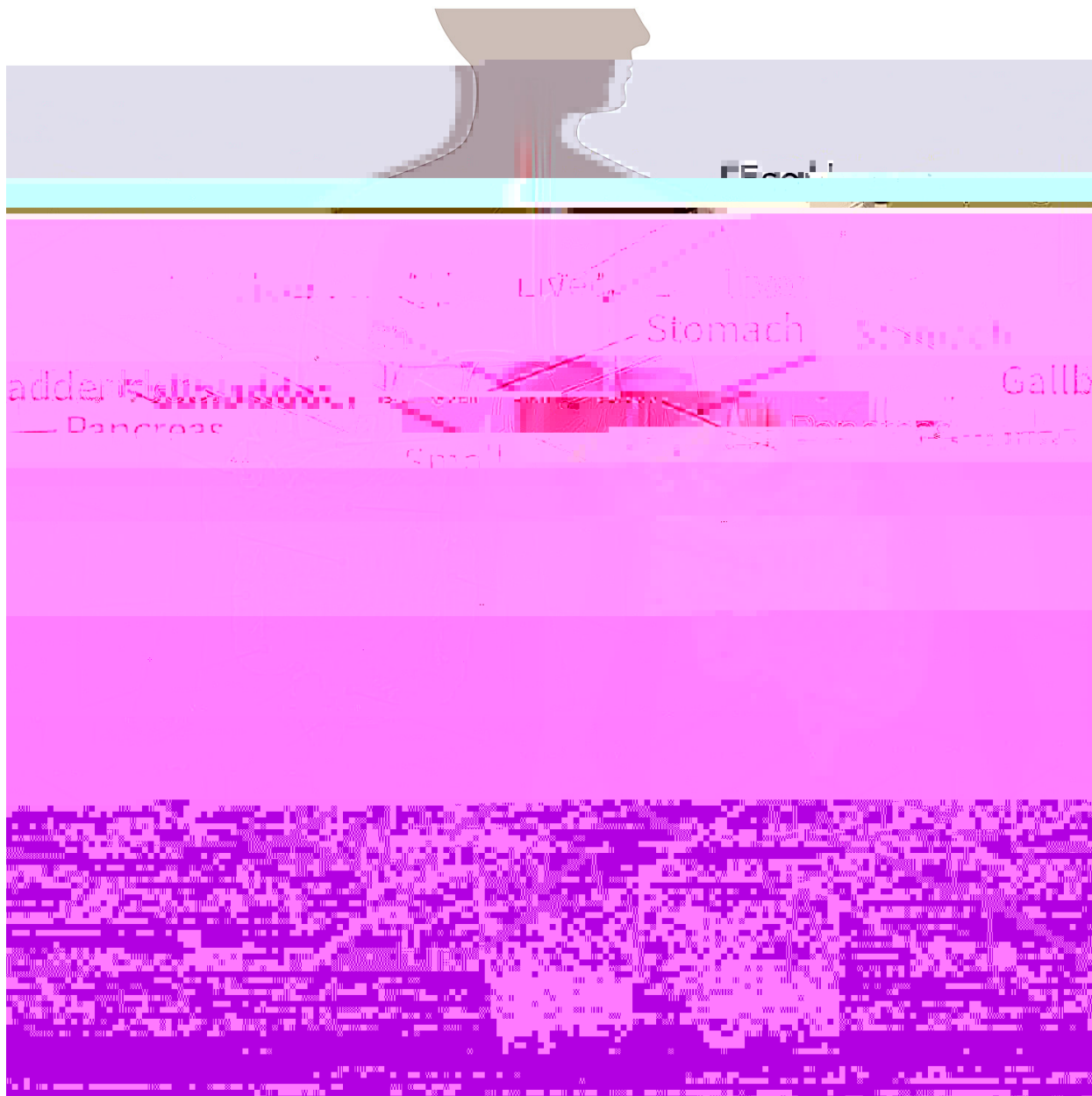
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## What is liver cancer?

Liver cancer is a cancer that starts in the liver. It happens when cells in the liver start to change and grow out of control, crowding out normal cells. This makes it hard for the body to work the way it should. The liver makes bile to help the body use food. It also cleans the blood and helps the blood clot when you are cut.

Liver cancer cells can spread to other parts of the body. When cancer does this, it's called **metastasis**.



## The liver

Ask your doctor to use this picture to show you where the cancer is.

## Different kinds of liver cancer

### Primary liver cancer

If a cancer starts in the liver, it is called primary liver cancer. There are many types of liver cancer. Some are very rare. Your doctor can tell you more about the type you have.

The most common type of liver cancer is called hepatocellular carcinoma. Also known as HCC. It starts in the cells that make up the liver.

Some rare types of liver cancer are:

- Angiosarcoma
- Hemangiosarcoma

These cancers start in the cells lining the blood vessels of the liver. They often grow quickly.

### **Secondary liver cancer**

Most of the time when cancer is found in the liver it didn't start there. It spread there (metastasized) from somewhere else in the body. Because the cancer has spread from where it started, it's called a secondary liver cancer. So, cancer that started in the lung and spreads to the liver is called lung cancer with spread to the liver, not liver cancer. And this cancer is treated like lung cancer.

### **Questions to ask the doctor**

- Why do you think I have cancer?
- Is there a chance I don't have cancer?
- Would you please write down the kind of cancer you think I might have?
- What will happen next?

### **How does the doctor know I have liver cancer?**

Liver cancer often doesn't cause [signs and symptoms](#)<sup>1</sup> until it has grown very large or spread.

Some symptoms of liver cancer are unplanned weight loss, don't feel like eating, feeling full after a small meal, belly pain and swelling, and itchy, yellow skin. The doctor will ask you questions about your health and do a physical exam.

## Tests that might be done

If signs are pointing to liver cancer, more tests may be done. Here are some of the [tests<sup>2</sup>](#) you may need:

**Ultrasound:** For this test, a small wand is moved around on your skin. It gives off sound waves and picks up the echoes as they bounce off tissues. The echoes are made into a picture on a computer screen. This test is often the first test used to look at the liver.

**CT or CAT scan:** This scan uses x-rays to make detailed pictures of your body. It can show the size, shape, and place of any tumors in or near the liver.

**MRI:** This scan uses radio waves and strong magnets instead of x-rays to make detailed pictures. MRI scans can help tell if tumors in the liver are cancer. They can also be used to look at blood vessels in and around the liver. They can help find out if liver cancer has spread.

**Lab tests:** Blood tests can check a protein called AFP (alpha-fetoprotein). AFP is often very high in people with liver cancer. Other blood tests can also help find out how well the liver is working.

**Liver biopsy:** In a biopsy, the doctor takes out a small piece of tissue where the cancer seems to be. The tissue is checked for cancer.

There are many types of biopsies. Ask your doctor what kind you will need. Each type has risks and benefits. The choice of which type to use depends on your own case.

Sometimes MRI or CT scans clearly show liver cancer and a biopsy isn't needed.

## Questions to ask the doctor

- What tests will I need to have?
- Who will do these tests?
- Where will the tests be done?
- Who can explain the tests to me?
- How and when will I get the test results?
- Who will explain the test results to me?
- What do I need to do next?

## How serious is my cancer?

If you have liver cancer, the doctor will want to find out how far it has spread. This is called **staging**. The stage describes the growth or spread of the cancer through the liver. It also tells if the cancer has spread to other organs of your body that are close by or far away. Your doctor will want to find out the stage of your cancer to help decide what type of treatment is best for you.

### Staging the cancer

Your cancer can be stage 1, 2, 3, or 4. The lower the number, the less the cancer has spread. A higher number, like stage 4, means the cancer has spread outside the liver.

Doctors may also group liver cancers more simply, based on whether or not they can be entirely cut out (resected). Resectable means can be removed by surgery.

Be sure to ask about your cancer stage and what it means.

### Questions to ask the doctor

- Do you know the stage of the cancer?
- If not, how and when will you find out the stage of the cancer?
- Would you explain to me what the stage means in my case?
- Based on the stage of the cancer, how long do you think I'll live?
- What will happen next?

## What kind of treatment will I need?

There are many ways to [treat liver cancer](#)<sup>3</sup>, but the main types of treatment are:

- Surgery
- Tumor ablation
- Embolization
- Radiation
- Immunotherapy
- Targeted therapy
- Chemotherapy

Many times more than one kind of treatment is used.

The treatment plan that's best for you will depend on:

- The stage of the cancer
- How well your liver is working
- The chance that a type of treatment will cure the cancer or help in some way
- Your age
- Other health problems you have
- Your feelings about the treatment and the side effects that come with it

### **Surgery for liver cancer**

Surgery is the only way to try to cure liver cancer. Surgery can be done to take out the part of the liver with the tumor or to do a liver transplant. Talk to the doctor about the kind of surgery planned and what you can expect.

**Side effects of surgery:** Any type of surgery can have risks and side effects. Be sure to ask your cancer care team what you can expect. If you have problems, let your doctors know. Doctors who treat liver cancer should be able to help you with any problems that come up.

### **Ablation for liver cancer**

Ablation is a treatment that destroys small liver tumors without taking them out. There are a number of ways to do this, such as heating the tumor with radio waves or microwaves, freezing the tumor, or killing the tumor by putting alcohol in it. Talk to the doctor about the planned treatment and what you can expect.

### **Embolization for liver cancer**

Some patients with tumors that cannot be removed by surgery can have embolization. It can be used for tumors that are too large to be treated with ablation. Embolization can also be used with ablation. Substances are injected into the tumor or nearby blood vessels, to try to block or reduce some of the blood supply to the cancer. This causes the cancer cells to die.

There are different types of embolization procedures (arterial embolization, chemoembolization, and radioembolization). But this treatment may not be a good







things. You may want to know more about them.

Some of these are known to help, but many have not been tested. Some have been shown not to help. A few have even been found to be harmful. Talk to your doctor about anything you're thinking about using, whether it's a vitamin, a diet, or anything else.

### **Questions to ask the doctor**

- What treatment do you think is best for me?
- What's the goal of this treatment? Do you think it could cure the cancer?
- Will treatment include surgery? If so, who will do the surgery?
- What will the surgery be like?
- Will I need other types of treatment, too? What's the goal of these treatments?
- What side effects could I have from these treatments?
- What can I do about side effects that I might have?
- Is there a clinical trial that might be right for me?  
What about special vitamins or diets that friends tell me about? How will I know if

feel better.

You can't change the fact that you have cancer. What you can change is how you [live](#)

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