

Liver Cancer

What causes liver cancer?

There are two types of liver cancer, primary and secondary. Secondary liver cancers are caused by cancer that has started in another area of the body spreading to the liver; the liver is a common area for secondary spread especially for people with bowel cancer. Primary liver cancer is a cancer that starts growing within the liver (Hepatocellular carcinoma or HCC). There are several risk factors that increase the likelihood of developing HCC. People most at risk of HCC are those with cirrhosis of the liver. Over 80% of liver cancers are associated with cirrhosis. The most common causes of cirrhosis are viral hepatitis (chronic hepatitis B & C) and alcohol abuse. Chronic hepatitis B can cause liver cancer even without cirrhosis. Other factors that have been linked to liver cancer include obesity, smoking, anabolic steroid abuse and chemicals used in plastic production.

Symptoms

Often symptoms of liver cancer will not be evident until the cancer is at an advanced stage. Symptoms that may then appear include fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, pain to the right side of the upper abdomen and jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes.) If anyone (even without any of the risk factors) experiences any of these symptoms they should be seen by a liver specialist immediately.

Diagnosis

Liver cancer will be diagnosed with a combination of blood tests and imaging such as ultrasound, CT, MRI (different types of 'X-ray.'). A liver biopsy may be necessary and involves the doctors taking a small sample of liver tissue to be examined in the laboratory.

Treatment

Any form of treatment works best if the tumour is small or the tumour nodules are very few in number.

Radio Frequency Ablation

This is a procedure where the doctor will use heat delivered by probes into the tumour to destroy the cancer cells. Sometimes the doctor may use another type of ablation where they will inject the tumour with ethanol (a type of alcohol) to destroy the tumour. The tumours need to be below a certain size and well away from major blood vessels and bile ducts within the liver.

Embolisation

Embolisation involves cutting off the blood supply to the affected area of the liver, this decreases the supply of oxygen and nutrients to the tumour. In some cases chemotherapy drugs may be given into the blood vessels that supply the liver prior to embolising them, this is called *transarterial chemoembolisation*. Embolisation is not considered a curative treatment, but may shrink the tumour and help prolong life. It can be used to treat larger tumours than radio frequency ablation.

Liver resection

If the cancer is of a size and position to be operable then a surgeon can remove the affected area of the liver. This also depends on having good liver function.

Transplant

If the cancer has not spread outside of the liver and it is small in size the patient may be suitable for a liver transplant. If a suitable liver can be found then a transplant can cure the patient of cancer in most cases, but this is not a suitable option for many patients.

Surveillance

If you have cirrhosis then it is important that you are under the care of a liver specialist who will undertake regular surveillance with ultrasound in most cases of cirrhosis. This enables discovery of any cancer at an early stage and thereby increases the chance of successful treatment and cure.

Prevention

There are some steps you can take to reduce your risk of developing liver cancer; these involve minimising any damage to your liver. If you are at risk of exposure to hepatitis B & C then consider vaccination for hepatitis B and risk reduction for hepatitis C. Avoid excess alcohol and drink within the recommended limits. If you are significantly overweight then take steps to lose weight and increase physical activity.

If you would like more information on liver cancer then contact the Liver Unit at the Wellington Hospital on 0207 586 7156 or via e-mail at David.Morrison@HCAHealthcare.co.uk

Or visit the links below:

www.cancerhelp.org.uk/help/default.asp?page=4891
www.cancerbackup.org.uk/Cancertype/Liver/Primarylivercancer