

Liver cancer

Liver cancer can be a primary cancer, meaning it starts in the liver, or a secondary cancer, meaning it starts in another part of the body and spreads to the liver. Secondary liver cancers are more common than primary liver cancers. Primary liver cancer is one of the less common cancers in Victoria. Liver cancer usually has no symptoms in the early stages.

Functions of the liver

The liver is the largest organ inside the body. It is located on the right side of the abdomen and is protected by the ribcage. The liver will function normally with only a small portion of it in working order. Its functions include:

- Destroying harmful substances, such as alcohol, and getting rid of waste products
- Converting food containing fats and sugars to be used by the body for energy
- Producing bile to help the digestion of food.

Primary liver cancers

Primary liver cancer is one of the less common cancers in Victoria with about 340 people diagnosed each year. It is more common in men and people aged over 65 years. Most primary liver cancers start in liver cells (these are called hepatocellular carcinoma), while others start in a bile duct and are referred to as cholangiocarcinoma.

In Western cultures, most people who develop primary liver cancer also have cirrhosis of the liver. This is scarring of the liver due to causes including heavy alcohol drinking over a long period of time. However, only a small number of people who have cirrhosis of the liver develop primary liver cancer. Infection with hepatitis B, C or D can also increase the risk of cirrhosis and, later, primary liver cancer.

Secondary liver cancers

Secondary liver cancer is the most common liver cancer. A secondary liver cancer starts somewhere else in the body and spreads (metastasises) to the liver.

Most cancers can spread to the liver but the common ones are breast, stomach and bowel cancers. These liver cancers are named after the primary cancer, for example breast cancer that has spread to the liver is called metastatic breast cancer. Sometimes the liver cancer is discovered first, which leads to the diagnosis of the primary cancer.

Causes of liver cancer

Liver cancer is often caused by damage to the liver due to:

- Cirrhosis (scarring of the liver tissue from alcohol)
- Hepatitis B or C or D
- Some chemicals that are now rarely used.

Symptoms of liver cancer

Symptoms often don't appear in the early stages of liver cancer. There are few nerves through the liver, so pain is not felt. Symptoms are the same for both primary and secondary liver cancer.

In later stages, liver cancer can cause an ache in the upper abdomen or back. Because there are no nerves through the liver it means pain is not felt in the liver but rather around the area due to distension, irritation or inflammation of the liver.

Other symptoms include loss of appetite, weakness and loss of weight (particularly loss of muscle in the arms and legs), nausea, fever and jaundice (yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes). The abdomen may also be swollen.

If you have one of these symptoms, but have not been diagnosed with this cancer, remember that it's rare, and your symptom is likely to be due to something else. However, see your doctor if you have any symptom that persists for more than two weeks. Do not delay seeing a doctor if you have any signs of jaundice or unexplained loss of muscle in the arms and legs.

Diagnosis of liver cancer

Liver cancer is usually diagnosed with a number of different tests, which may include:

- **Blood tests** – to check your general health and to check for a chemical usually found in increased levels in people with primary liver cancer.
- **Ultrasound** – a picture of the liver is taken using sound waves.
- **Computed tomography (CT) scan** – a specialised x-ray taken from many different angles to build a three-dimensional (3-D) picture of the body.
- **Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)** – similar to a CT scan, but uses magnetism instead of x-rays to build a picture of the body.
- **Liver biopsy** – a small piece of liver tissue is removed with a needle and examined for cancer cells.
- **Laparoscopy** – a small cut in the lower abdomen allows a thin mini-telescope (laparoscope) to be inserted to look at the liver and take a sample of the liver tissue.

If the tests show you have secondary liver cancer, you may need further tests to find out where the primary cancer is.

Treatment for liver cancer

Treatment for liver cancer will depend on whether it is a primary or secondary cancer. Treatment options may include:

- **Surgery** – to remove the cancer and damaged tissue. This is the main treatment for primary liver cancer. Surgery is only useful for secondary liver cancer if the cancer cells only affect one part of the liver.
- **Chemotherapy** – the use of tablets or injections of anti-cancer drugs. Sometimes they are provided into the veins via a drip, or injected directly into the artery that feeds the cancer in the liver. Chemotherapy is the main treatment for secondary liver cancer and is sometimes used for primary liver cancer.
- **Radiotherapy** – x-rays are used to target and kill cancer cells. Radiotherapy may help in treating some types of primary liver cancers and may be used to relieve symptoms of pain and discomfort from secondary liver cancer.
- **Complementary and alternative therapies** – it's common for people with cancer to seek out complementary or alternative treatments. When used alongside your conventional cancer treatment, some of these therapies can make you feel better and improve quality of life. Others may not be so helpful and in some cases may be harmful. It is important to tell all your health care professionals about any complementary medicines you are taking and never stop taking your conventional treatment without consulting your doctor first.

All treatments can have side effects. Before you begin treatment, your medical team will let you know about specific side effects for the treatment you are having.

When a cure isn't possible

If liver cancer has been diagnosed in its later stages, the cancer may have spread to the point where a cure is no longer possible. Treatment then focuses on improving quality of life by relieving the symptoms (this is called 'palliative' treatment). Treatment options at this point may include medications to relieve pain, nausea and vomiting.

Caring for someone with cancer

Caring for someone with cancer can be a difficult and emotional time. If you or someone you know is caring for someone with liver cancer they may find it helpful to download and read the Cancer Council Victoria information booklets.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
 - Specialist
 - Palliative care team
 - Cancer Council Helpline Tel. 13 11 20
 - Multilingual Cancer Information Line, Victoria Tel. (03) 9209 0169
 - Cancer Council Victoria
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- Cancer Council Victoria's booklet *Complementary and alternative cancer therapies..*

Things to remember

- The liver will function normally with only a small portion of it in working order.
- Most liver cancers are secondary liver cancers, meaning a cancer that starts somewhere else in the body and spreads to the liver.
- Primary liver cancers are one of the less common cancers in Victoria.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Cancer Council Victoria

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