

## Liver cancer

Liver cancer can be a primary cancer (starts in the liver) or a secondary cancer (starts in another part of the body and spreads to the liver). Primary liver cancer is one of the less common cancers in Victoria. Secondary liver cancers are the most common liver cancers. 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 260 people diagnosed each year. It is more common in men and people aged over 65 years. Most primary liver cancers start in liver cells (hepatocellular carcinoma); others start in a bile duct (cholangiocarcinoma).

In the Western world, 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.

### Symptoms

Liver cancer usually has no symptoms in the early stages. There are no nerves through the liver so pain is not felt. In its later stages, liver cancer can cause:

- Pain in the upper right side of the abdomen
- Fever
- Yellowing of the skin and eyes (jaundice)
- Nausea
- Weakness
- Weight loss
- Loss of appetite
- Swelling of the abdomen.

### Diagnosis

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.

- **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

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 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.

### 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). Options may include medications such as painkillers.

### Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Specialist
- The Cancer Council Victoria, Cancer Helpline Tel. 131 120
- Multilingual Cancer Information Line, Victoria - see the CCV website for contact details

### 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, which means 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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