



cancer.org | 1.800.227.2345

About Liver Cancer

Get an overview of liver cancer and the latest key statistics in the US.

Overview and Types

If you have been diagnosed with liver cancer or are worried about it, you likely have a lot of questions. Learning some basics is a good place to start.

- [What Is Liver Cancer?](#)

Research and Statistics

See the latest estimates for new cases of liver cancer and deaths in the US and what research is currently being done.

- [Key Statistics About Liver Cancer](#)
- [What's New in Liver Cancer Research?](#)

What Is Liver Cancer?

- [The liver](#)
- [Primary liver cancer](#)
- [Secondary liver cancer \(metastatic liver cancer\)](#)
- [Benign liver tumors](#)

- It breaks down and stores many of the nutrients absorbed from the intestine that your body needs to function. Some nutrients must be changed (metabolized) in the liver before they can be used for energy or to build and repair body tissues.
- It makes most of the clotting factors that keep you from bleeding too much when you are cut or injured.
- It delivers bile into the intestines to help absorb nutrients (especially fats).
It breaks down alcohol, drugs, and toxic wastes in the blood, which then pass from

Intrahepatic cholangiocarcinoma (bile duct cancer)

About 10% to 20% of cancers that start in the liver are intrahepatic cholangiocarcinomas. These cancers start in the cells that line the small bile ducts (tubes that carry bile to the gallbladder) within the liver. Most cholangiocarcinomas, however, actually start in the bile ducts outside the liver.

Although the rest of this information is mainly about hepatocellular cancers, cholangiocarcinomas are often treated the same way. For more detailed information on this type of cancer, see [Bile Duct Cancer](#)².

Angiosarcoma and hemangiosarcoma

These are rare cancers that begin in cells lining the blood vessels of the liver. People who have been exposed to vinyl chloride or to thorium dioxide (Thorotrast) are more likely to develop these cancers (see [Liver cancer risk factors](#)).³ Some other cases are thought to be caused by exposure to arsenic or radium, or to an inherited condition known as **hereditary hemochromatosis**. In about half of all cases, no likely cause can be identified.

These tumors grow quickly and are usually too widespread to be removed surgically by the time they are found. Chemotherapy and radiation therapy may help slow the disease, but these cancers are usually very hard to treat. These cancers are treated like other sarcomas. For more information, see [Soft Tissue Sarcoma](#)⁴.

Hepatoblastoma

This is a very rare kind of cancer that develops in children, usually in those younger than 4 years old. The cells of hepatoblastoma are similar to fetal liver cells. About 2 out of 3 children with these tumors are treated successfully with surgery and chemotherapy, although the tumors are harder to treat if they have spread outside the liver.

Secondary liver cancer (metastatic liver cancer)

Most of the time when cancer is found in the liver it did not start there but has spread (metastasized) from somewhere else in the body, such as the pancreas, colon, stomach, breast, or lung. Because this cancer has spread from its original (primary) site, it is called a **secondary** liver cancer. These tumors are named and treated based on their primary site (where they started). For example, cancer that started in the lung and spread to the liver is called **lung cancer with spread to the liver**, not liver cancer. It is also treated as lung cancer.

In the United States and Europe, secondary (metastatic) liver tumors are more common than primary liver cancer. The opposite is true for many areas of Asia and Africa.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/understanding-cancer/what-is-cancer.html
2. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/bile-duct-cancer.html
3. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/liver-cancer/causes-risks-prevention/risk-factors.html
4. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/soft-tissue-sarcoma.html
5. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/advanced-cancer.html

References

Abou-Alfa GK, Jarnigan W, Dika IE, D'Angelica M, Lowery M, Brown K, et al. Ch. 77 - Liver and Bile Duct Cancer. In: Niederhuber JE, Armitage JO, Doroshow JH, Kastan MB, Tepper JE, eds. *Abeloff's Clinical Oncology*. 6th ed. Philadelphia, Pa: Elsevier; 2020:1314–1341.

National Cancer Institute. Physician Data Query (PDQ). Adult Primary Liver Cancer Treatment. Accessed at <https://www.cancer.gov/types/liver/hp/adult-liver-treatment-pdq> on March 13, 2019.

National Cancer Institute. Physician Data Query (PDQ). Childhood Liver Cancer Symptoms, Tests, Prognosis, and Stages – Patient Version. Accessed at https://www.cancer.gov/types/liver/patient/about-child-liver-cancer-pdq#_1. on March 12, 2019.

Suriawinata A. Pathology of malignant tumors. UpToDate website. <https://www.uptodate.com/contents/pathology-of-malignant-liver-tumors>. Updated August 21, 2017. Accessed March 12, 2019.

Schwartz JM and Kruskal JB. Solid liver lesions: Differential diagnosis and evaluation. UpToDate website. <https://www.uptodate.com/contents/solid-liver-lesions-differential-diagnosis-and-evaluation>. Updated March 14, 2018. Accessed March 12, 2019.

Last Revised: April 1, 2019

Key Statistics About Liver Cancer

- [Where is liver cancer more common?](#)

The American Cancer Society's estimates for primary liver cancer and intrahepatic bile duct cancer in the United States for 2024 are:

- About 41,630 new cases (28,000 in men and 13,630 in women) will be diagnosed
- About 29,840 people (19,120 men and 10,720 women) will die of these cancers

Liver cancer incidence rates have more than tripled since 1980, while the death rates have more than doubled during this time.

Where is liver cancer more common?

Liver cancer is much more common in countries in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia than in the US. In many of these countries it is the most common type of cancer. More than 800,000 people are diagnosed with this cancer each year throughout the world. Liver cancer is also a leading cause of cancer deaths worldwide, accounting for more than 700,000 deaths each year.

Visit the [_____](#)

What's New in Liver Cancer Research?

- [Prevention](#)
- [Screening](#)
- [Surgery](#)
- [Ablation therapy](#)
- [Targeted therapy](#)
- [Biomarkers](#)
- [Virus therapy](#)

Because there are only a few effective ways to prevent or treat liver cancer at this time, there is always a great deal of research going on in the area of liver cancer. Scientists are looking for causes and ways to prevent liver cancer, as well as ways to improve treatments.

Prevention

Some scientists believe that vaccinations and improved treatments for hepatitis could prevent about half of liver cancer cases worldwide. Researchers are studying ways to prevent or treat hepatitis infections before they cause liver cancers. Research into developing a vaccine to prevent hepatitis C is ongoing. Progress is also being made in treating chronic hepatitis.

Screening

Several new blood tests are being studied to see if they can detect liver cancer earlier than using [AFP and ultrasound](#)¹. Ones being studied include DCP, Glypican-3, osteopontin and Golgi protein-73. CT scans and MRI scans are also being studied as different [imaging tests](#)² to screen for liver cancer instead of ultrasound.

Surgery

Newer techniques are being developed to make both partial hepatectomy and liver transplants safer and more effective.

Adding other treatments to surgery

An active area of research uses adjuvant therapies – treatments given right after surgery

advanced hepatocellular carcinoma: Sorafenib and beyond. *Cancer Treat Rev.* 2018 Jul;68:16-24. doi: 10.1016/j.ctrv.2018.05.006. Epub 2018 May 26.

Salati U, Barry A, Chou FY, Ma R, Liu DM. State of the ablation nation: a review of ablative therapies for cure in the treatment of hepatocellular carcinoma. *Future Oncol.* 2017 Jul;13(16):1437-1448. doi: 10.2217/fon-2017-0061. Epub 2017 Jul 7.

Tenneti P, Borad MJ, Babiker HM. Exploring the role of oncolytic viruses in hepatobiliary cancers. *Immunotherapy.* 2018 Aug;10(11):971-986. doi: 10.2217/imt-2018-0048. Epub 2018 Jun 14.

The American Cancer Society medical and editorial content team
(<https://www.cancer.org/cancer/acs-medical-content-and-news-staff.html>)

Our team is made up of doctors and oncology certified nurses with deep knowledge of cancer care as well as journalists, editors, and translators with extensive experience in medical writing.

American Cancer Society medical information is copyrighted material. For reprint requests, please see our Content Usage Policy (www.cancer.org/about-us/policies/content-usage.html).

cancer.org | 1.800.227.2345