Why Does Liver Cancer Cause Pain, and How Do We Treat It?

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Liver Cancer Pain and How to Treat It

It is likely that if you've recently been diagnosed with liver cancer, it was diagnosed in a later stage. In its early stages when it is easier to treat, symptoms are typically nonexistent or vague, such as fatigue, night sweats, fever and chills.

When symptoms develop that lead to a liver cancer diagnosis, it has often progressed to a later stage.

Symptoms of Liver Cancer

Appetite loss with subsequent weight loss is common. A definitive symptom of liver cancer is jaundice with associated itching of the skin. Swelling of the lower extremities may also occur.

Liver cancer is also associated with pain, often felt in the right upper section of the abdomen. In advanced cases of liver cancer, pain is also felt in the left upper section of the abdomen due to splenomegaly (enlargement of the spleen). Pain may even be felt in the right shoulder.

Pain is extremely common with liver cancer. The pain may be associated with therapies used to treat the cancer; it may also be a direct cause of the cancer, such as the tumor putting pressure on nerves and other internal organs.

Treatment of Pain

It is estimated that one out of three people who are undergoing treatment for cancer experience pain. If the cancer has progressed and become advanced, that number is even higher.

Everyone will feel pain in a different way, meaning that each treatment plan for controlling pain must be individualized.

There are many ways to treat cancer pain. Medications are often used; over-the-counter medications, such as ibuprofen or acetaminophen are in this category.

Weak opioids, such as codeine, and strong opioids, such as morphine, fentanyl and methadone, can also be used.

There are also a variety of non-medicinal ways to treat cancer pain. Examples include acupuncture, biofeedback, distraction techniques, counseling, imagery, skin stimulation, massage and use of cold or heat.

Creating a Treatment Plan for You

Cancer pain can be difficult to treat because people who are suffering often are afraid to speak up to their physicians about their pain. Others may fear they will be addicted to pain medications, although this is not likely to happen if taken when actually in pain.

Side effects can happen because of pain medications, and others may fear side effects.

It is important to keep the lines of communication open with your physician; doing so allows you to create an effective treatment plan. The first thing to do is, with your physician, evaluate the severity of your pain so they can select the proper pain medication for you.

Mild to moderate pain:

- **Acetaminophen** (Tylenol).
- **Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs** (NSAIDs) such as aspirin and ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin).

Most prescriptions that are useful for mild to moderate pain are over-the-counter, but some may require a prescription.

Some medications may interfere with chemotherapy; NSAIDs may interfere with blood clotting, leading to heart attack or stroke. All medication should be cleared with your physician due to the risks.

Moderate to severe pain:

- **Narcotic pain relievers**, like codeine, morphine (MS Contin), hydrocodone (Lortab, Vicodin), fentanyl, among many others.
- **Antidepressants** (like amitriptyline and nortriptyline) can be used for neuropathic pain, even if you are not depressed.
- **Anticonvulsants**, like gabapentin (Neurontin) and carbamazepine (Tegretol), are typically used for seizures, but are also often used for neuropathic pain.
- **Corticosteroids**, such as prednisone, can be used to lessen swelling.

Narcotic pain relievers always require a prescription. They may also be used in conjunction with mild pain relievers such as acetaminophen and ibuprofen.

Non-Medication Pain Treatments

Integrating non-medication treatments into conventional treatments can also prove very effective. Adding these therapies to medical therapies is recommended – unless your physician recommends otherwise.

Popular non-medication treatments include:

- **Acupuncture:** Very thin needles are placed into the body at certain pressure points for 15 to 30 minutes. Only a licensed acupuncturist should perform acupuncture.
- **Massage:** Hands are used in a slow, steady motion over or near the areas of pain. Self-massage may be helpful, although seeing a licensed massage therapist can be therapeutic. If you are getting radiation therapy, avoid massage in the treatment area.
- **Cold and heat therapy:** Heat can be used to relieve tension in the muscles, and cold can decrease pain by numbing the area. Neither therapy should be used on bare skin. Cold and heat therapy should be avoided in areas of radiation and for six months after treatment ends.

Keep in mind that the best pain treatment plan is one that you create with your physician. This can be done most effectively by being honest about your pain.