Is Liver Cancer Considered Fatal?

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Is Liver Cancer Fatal? Understanding the Complications of Liver Cancer

Receiving a liver cancer diagnosis can be frightening, and you probably have many questions. Perhaps, there is one you are afraid to ask.

You want to know if liver cancer is fatal and how much time do you have left. Both are questions that don't have exact answers, but your likely outcome will depend on how advanced your cancer is.

Is Liver Cancer Fatal?

The information on liver cancer survival rates may be difficult to process and is not something you should read up on if you are not ready for this information.

An important thing to consider is the survival statistics for liver cancer are general and do not necessarily apply to your unique case. No two cases are exactly alike, and the response to treatment varies from person to person.

Lastly, no one can tell you how long you will live with liver cancer or if you will be cured.

The decision to talk to your doctor about your prognosis is personal, and it is up to you to decide how much you want to know. Some people feel that it makes it easier to cope if they know what they are up against and others find survival statistics to be scary and confusing.

Your cancer doctor is the most familiar with your health and can discuss your prognosis and explain what the statistics mean for you. It is important to note and understand that your prognosis can change and cancer treatment outcomes are hard to forecast with precise accuracy.

Your cancer treatments may not work and your cancer may spread. However, it is also possible the treatments may work and your cancer shrinks and doesn't spread to nearby tissue or organs.

Another option is surgery, this may involve removing a part of your liver, or you may receive a liver transplant - and you could be cured.

No one knows for sure what the final result will be, so it is important to focus on the big picture which is what you do after receiving a liver cancer diagnosis.

What Affects Survival?

According to the American Cancer Society, the survival rate for liver cancer when discovered early on is 31%. There are, however, many different factors that would increase or decrease a person's survival, including any additional liver diseases.

The reason the survival rate is low even in the early stages has a lot to do with how much damage the liver has experienced. Many people with liver cancer may have liver cirrhosis or other liver damage due to excessive alcohol consumption, smoking, and other unhealthy habits.

Liver damage can make the liver inoperable. However, if you are fortunate enough to have a liver with little or no damage, surgery is a likely option for you and may increase your survival rate to up to 50%, according to the American Cancer Society.

A liver transplant in early-stage can bring up your survival rates up to 70%. Unfortunately, most cases of liver cancer are not detected early enough.

If the liver cancer has spread to nearby organs and lymph nodes, the survival rate decreases to 11%, and if the cancer has spread to distant organs and tissues, the survival rate drops to 3%.

For the most part, survival rates are highest if you have surgery to remove the tumor, regardless of how advanced the cancer is. If the cancer is eliminated during surgery, you are considered cured.

Next page: Learn about the different stages of liver cancer.

Liver Cancer Stages

Staging is the way to describe where your liver cancer is located in cases where the cancer has spread to other nearby tissues and organs. Additionally, staging helps your doctor offer you a measurement of your prognosis and chances of recovery.

Stage 1 Liver Cancer

Early stage liver cancer (stage 1 liver cancer), can be cured with radiofrequency ablation or a liver transplant. At this point, the tumor is small and isn't putting any pressure on the portal vein, the vein that carries blood from various organs (gastrointestinal tract, bladder, pancreas, and spleen) to the liver.

Radiofrequency ablation (RFA) uses imaging to guide a needle to through the skin into a liver tumor. High-frequency electrical currents are passed through the needle, using heat to destroy cancer cells.

According to the Radiological Society of North America, the success rate for RFA treatment in eradicating small liver tumors is more than 85 percent.

Stage 2 Liver Cancer

Stage 2 liver cancer involves a primary tumor which has grown into the blood vessels, or there are several small tumors – all less than 2 inches in width.

At this point, the cancer has not spread to any nearby tissues, organs or lymph nodes.

Stage 3 Liver Cancer

Stage 3 liver cancer is divided into three categories:

- **Stage 3A** involves several tumors, and at least one is more than 2 inches wide. At this point, the cancer is yet to spread to lymph nodes or nearby tissues and organs.
- **Stage 3B** involves several tumors, and at least one of these is infringing upon the branch of the portal vein or hepatic vessel, the short blood vessel supplying oxygenated blood to the liver and other nearby vital organs, and the cancer still has not spread to nearby tissues and organs.
- **Stage 3C** involves a tumor that has grown into a nearby organ, or the tumors have grown into a layer of

the liver. However, it still has not spread to nearby lymph nodes, tissues, and organs.

Stage 4 Liver Cancer

Stage 4 liver cancer is the most advanced form where the cancer has spread to nearby lymph nodes and may be growing into blood vessels or organs.

Liver cancer does not metastasize (spread) to distant organs, but when it does, the lungs and the bones are usually affected.

The Reality of Stage 4 Cancer

Stage 4 means your cancer has spread from the liver to other organs and tissues. Moreover, stage 4 has some complicated symptoms.

Symptoms of stage 4 liver cancer include:

- Weight loss and loss of appetite
- Persistent nausea and vomiting
- Jaundice
- Weakness and fatigue
- Fever
- Enlarged liver or spleen
- Swelling of the abdomen

Stage 4 is the final stage of liver cancer so it is important to understand those liver cancer symptoms may progress and worsen over time.

Even in this stage, your cancer is treatable. Chemoembolization (a form of chemotherapy) and targeted therapies with kinase inhibitor drugs can slow down the growth of tumors.

Your doctor may also recommend treatments to help ease symptoms associated with this late liver cancer stage.

In general, the life expectancy of someone with stage 4 liver cancer is not good, as doctors consider this stage to be the most critical. This advanced stage means things are going to get worse with time.

The average survival of someone in this stage is six months to two years. However, life expectancy with liver cancer is not an exact science and how long you live and whether you could potentially be cured will depend on your overall health.

Survival Rates are General Statistics

Survival rates are based on the length of time others have survived after being diagnosed, either 5 or 10 years after diagnosis. These rates include people who are cancer-free and those still treating for liver cancer.

Because survival rates are based on outcomes for people who have previously had liver cancer, they cannot tell you what will happen in your particular case.

Your doctor is the person who is in the best position to explain how the numbers may apply to you and your particular case.

Next page: Learn ways to cope with living with liver cancer.

Living with Liver Cancer

Living with and managing liver cancer is in no way easy. However, there are ways to deal with pain, other symptoms and the emotional aspects of the disease.

Pain Management

For advanced stages of liver cancer, pain management becomes necessary. Your doctor can help you find treatments and medications to manage pain.

If you want to avoid side effects, acupuncture, acupressure, and deep breathing are great alternative pain management therapies.

Educate Yourself

Find out all you can about your cancer and the treatment options. This way you are better informed about making decisions about your care.

Ask your doctor to explain staging and what it means to you, your potential prognosis, and what treatments would work in your case.

Finding Support

You should stay close to loved ones, as your friends and family can provide physical and emotional support.

It is also important to find someone to talk to. It could be a friend, a relative, a therapist, a religious leader or others living with liver cancer.

Having people to talk to can help you cope and manage the emotions that come along with living with liver cancer.

Don’t Give Up

You may feel that the statistics for liver cancer are grim and don’t leave much room for optimism. Regardless, the creative use of multiple therapies may significantly prolong your life and help you to feel well for as long as possible.

Clinical studies, experimental drug treatments, and advancements in radiological and interventional technologies are making it easier to treat tumors.

Furthermore, the liver cancer survival rates have doubled in the past 30 years; this proposes that there is more to come in the treatment of liver cancer and the outlook for so many.

Lastly, just remember, you are not your diagnosis or the stage of liver cancer you are in. You are a human being living with a disease, and you are not a statistic.

Don’t give up on yourself, your life and the possibility of getting better.