Do You Know the Risk Factors of Liver Cancer?

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Risk Factors for Liver Cancer and What Can Be Done to Prevent It

Liver cancer. We typically associate it with being an alcoholic, or at least with drinking a bit heavier than what is suggested by our physicians.

But what if you were diagnosed with liver cancer and you never *really* drank all that much alcohol? Or were never a drinker – at all?

Well, as with any type of cancer, it doesn't discriminate – cancer goes where it wants to go. It shows up where it wants to go, regardless of your habits.

However, there are a set of risk factors that increase the likelihood of developing liver cancer – and some of these risk factors have nothing to do with sipping a glass of wine.

What Are the Risk Factors for Liver Cancer?

According to the American Cancer Society, a risk factor is "anything that affects your chance of getting a disease."

When we look at cancer (or any disease for that matter), each type has a different set of risk factors. Each person, subsequently, may or may not have certain risk factors.

Having one risk factor may mean you'll get the cancer – and having all of the risk factors may mean you won't get the cancer. This means that risk factors don't tell the whole story – they merely help to estimate your *risk*, not if you actually *have* the cancer.

There are modifiable and nonmodifiable risk factors. For example, if your parent had liver cancer, this is a nonmodifiable risk factor. If you are a smoker, you can quit smoking – this is a modifiable risk factor.

So, without further ado, here are the risk factors for liver cancer.

Gender

Liver cancer is much more common in men than women. In fact, they develop liver cancer by a margin of 2 to 1. However, the subtype fibrolamellar liver cancer is more common in women than men.

Race/Ethnicity

Liver cancer affects Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders at the highest rate. Following are American Indians/Alaskan Natives, Hispanics/Latinos, African Americans, and whites.

Chronic Viral Hepatitis

Chronic viral hepatitis can be caused by hepatitis B virus (HBV) or hepatitis C virus (HCV), and worldwide, is the most common risk factor for the development of liver cancer.

HBV and HCV cause cirrhosis of the liver. When cirrhosis develops, it can lead to liver cancer. Because of the worldwide common risk factor, it is now the most common cancer in many parts of the world.

According to American Cancer Society, “People infected with both viruses have a high risk of developing chronic hepatitis, cirrhosis, and liver cancer. The risk is even higher if they are heavy drinkers (at least six standard drinks a day).”

HBV and HCV are spread through sharing of contaminated needles, unprotected sex, and childbirth. It can also be spread through blood transfusions, although this is now a rare occurrence in the US.

Cirrhosis

Having cirrhosis dramatically increases the risk of liver cancer. Cirrhosis causes the cells of the liver to become damaged and be replaced by scar tissue. In fact, people with liver cancer often already have cirrhosis.

These conditions often cause cirrhosis:

- Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD)
- Primary biliary cirrhosis
- Hereditary hemochromatosis
- Alcoholism

Type 2 Diabetes

Having type 2 diabetes has been linked to liver cancer, especially if the person with type 2 diabetes is also a heavy drinker and has chronic hepatitis. This risk may also be increased because people with type 2 diabetes are very often overweight or obese.

Having Certain Rare Diseases

Having certain rare diseases seems to increase the risk of developing liver cancer:

- Wilson disease
- Tyrosinemia
- Alpha1-antitrypsin deficiency
- Porphyria cutanea tarda
- Glycogen storage diseases

Exposure to Aflatoxins

An *aflatoxin* is a cancer-causing substance that grows as a result of a fungus in moist, warm environments. Aflatoxins contaminate corn, rice, peanuts, wheat, soybeans, and ground nuts.

Aflatoxins can occur anywhere in the world but are most common in warm, tropical climates. Also, the United States and Europe regulate aflatoxins by food testing.

Long-term exposure to aflatoxins can significantly increase the risk of developing liver cancer.

The Use of Anabolic Steroids

Anabolic steroids (male hormones) used by athletes can slightly increase the risk of developing liver cancer. This does not include the use of corticosteroids that you may be prescribed to reduce inflammation, such as prednisone or dexamethasone.

Modifiable Liver Cancer Risk Factors

According to the World Health Organization, there are three known modifiable risk factors for chronic diseases. They are as follows:

1. Unhealthy diet and excessive energy (calorie) intake
2. Physical inactivity
3. Smoking

The combination of these risk factors results in the following:

- Elevated blood pressure
- Increased glucose levels
- Abnormal blood lipids (especially LDL levels)
- Being overweight

When these modifiable risk factors meld with non-modifiable risk factors, events such as heart disease, stroke, respiratory disease, and cancer – such as liver cancer – occur.

How Can You Decrease Your Risk of Developing Liver Cancer?

So what can *you* do?

Well, there you can't change your gender. You can't change the fact that you have type 2 diabetes, or cirrhosis, or any number of the rare diseases that are listed above. If you've been exposure to aflatoxins for a good portion of time, it's likely that you can't change that either.

But, you can change how you're living, NOW.

If you're an alcoholic, you can take steps to reduce your alcohol intake or if you're a smoker, quit now.

You can also change the way you're eating. There are numerous ways to eat healthier, depending on your needs. For example, reduce your processed foods and increase your "whole" foods is a great way to go. You may want to consult with a registered dietitian (RD), especially if you have type 2 diabetes.

Get active! You don't need to start training for a marathon. Start a walking routine, even if it is for 10 minutes a few days per week – and build on your progress! In fact, starting small and working your way up incrementally is a great way to build your stamina.