How to Cope With Four Difficult Liver Cancer Symptoms

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Tips for Coping and Living With Liver Cancer Symptoms

Coping with any chronic illness can be difficult. But coping and living with liver cancer? Wow — it can be difficult. Below, we've outlined some of the more common liver cancer symptoms and various ways to cope with those symptoms.

Symptom: Itching

Itching is common with any type of disease related to the liver. It is not known specifically what causes itching, but one theory is that it is caused by the accumulation of toxins. The liver helps to filter toxins, so when it is not able to effectively filter toxin, these toxins may build up in the body, causing the itching. These toxins are different bile acids and bilirubin – when they build up, they also cause jaundice. A lab draw will show elevated bilirubin levels.

Managing the itching can be difficult. However, various medications can be helpful in reducing the itch:

- Gabapentin (Neurontin)
- Antihistamines (Benadryl, Atarax)
- Antidepressants
- Opioid antagonists (Narcan)
- Cholesterol lowering agents (Questran)

The idea is to be as comfortable as possible. Remember that the itching may not go away completely. Cold packs may temporarily relieve the itch. Avoid heat as much as possible – take warm showers as opposed to hot showers. A colloidal oatmeal bath in warm water may temporarily relieve the itch. Dress in loose, comfortable, breathable fabrics – this ensures that heat is not trapped in the clothing.

Symptom: Nausea and Vomiting

Nausea and vomiting may be related to the cancer itself, or to the treatment plan. However, it is important to control the symptoms because they can make it difficult to continue treatment and experience a better quality of life.

Uncontrolled vomiting can lead to serious consequences, such as electrolyte imbalances, malnutrition, dehydration, a torn esophagus, and the reopening of surgical wounds, amongst other things.

Acupuncture may help to control nausea and vomiting. In addition, the use of ginger has been proven to control nausea. The use of relaxation methods, such as guided imagery and hypnosis may prevent anticipatory vomiting.

Some of the same tips for "feeling very full after a small meal" below can also help with nausea and vomiting.

Symptom: Feeling Very Full After a Small Meal

Appetite tends to decrease during cancer treatment, or as a direct result of cancer itself.

Here are some ways to get more nutrition during the days. Many of these tips are also helpful for people who have nausea:

- Eat small amounts throughout the day. For people who feel full quickly or who feel nauseous, eating small amounts at various times throughout the day is more palatable.
- If you are never hungry, it may be helpful to schedule mealtimes.
- During times when you actually feel hungry, eat more!
- Consume liquids a half hour before meals. This way you can fill up on food during the meal.
- Consume foods and drinks that are palatable. Don't try to eat foods that make you sick. If an aroma of a certain food is making you nauseous, avoid it. Likewise, if an aroma of a certain food is making you hungry, eat it.

Symptom: Weight Loss Without Trying

This can be a difficult side effect – we try and try to lose weight throughout our lives, but then lose weight effortlessly with cancer. However, the weight loss is not a healthy weight loss. Even when we're overweight with a cancer diagnosis, it is recommended to maintain weight throughout treatment. So how can we keep the pounds *on?*

- Keep snacks handy at all times.
- If the pounds start coming off, consume foods that are high in fat, such as ice cream, cheese, heavy cream, cottage cheese and chocolate milk.
- Utilize nutritional supplements. Instant breakfast mixes and protein shakes may add extra calories if you just cannot eat something solid.
- Consult a dietitian – bonus points if they have experience with oncology patients. A dietitian can help create a diet plan to help maintain (or gain) weight throughout your cancer treatment.

There is no easy way to deal with cancer. While this a short list of liver cancer provides a few ideas on how to cope with the symptoms, this is in no way meant to be a substitute for medical advice from your oncologist. Please discuss these ideas with your health care team before putting them into practice.