What Happens When the Liver Cancer Comes Back?

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Liver Cancer Recurrence

Liver cancer remission can last for years, but recurrent liver cancer can bring your new routine to a screeching halt. It's no surprise that many patients live in fear of their cancer coming back, but you don't have to let that fear overwhelm your days.

The first step to a happier life in remission is a better understanding of recurrence and learning to use your knowledge of cancer and cancer treatment to work for you.

What to Know About Liver Cancer Recurrence

In many cases, a cancerous tumor in the liver can be extracted and the body healed, but there are times when cancer cells are left behind. For this reason, most doctors are reluctant to say a cancer has been "cured."

Although liver cancer remission can be permanent, there are some facts you should know about recurrence:

- **The site of recurrence matters.** Of the three types of cancer recurrence (local, regional, and distant), cancer that comes back in the same place (local) brings the best prognosis. When the cancer appears somewhere else in the body (distant), it has likely metastasized and will be very difficult to treat.
- **Other types of liver damage may increase your risk.** Liver conditions such as cirrhosis can damage cells to the point of mutation, which may lead to a new instance of liver cancer, or a recurrence of your initial cancer.
- **Recurrence is outside your control.** Even if you've done everything right with diet, exercise and follow-up appointments, your cancer could recur. It's not your fault, and it's important not to blame yourself for the recurrence.

Recent studies suggest that a second surgery (resection) is a good option if you've been in remission for at least one year and your cancer had not spread to the large portal vein in the liver.

Even when surgery isn't an option, it's important to remember that there are other treatments to fight the cancer and ease the symptoms, if the need should arise.

Techniques to Ease Fear and Anxiety

Even though you're in remission from liver cancer, memories of treatment and the dread of going through it all again can make it difficult to look ahead.

Instead of living in fear, take stock of your abilities, advantages, and resources in your post-cancer life:

- **Each day lowers your risk of recurrence**. Although some cancers can return years down the road, most

recurrences happen within two years of treatment. Feel encouraged that each day brings you closer to that marker, and once you pass it, your chances of recurrence fall even lower.

- **If cancer comes back, you are prepared to handle it.** One benefit of going through cancer treatment is the set of skills and experience you gain. If you do experience a cancer recurrence, you can take some comfort in the fact that you know your enemy, you already have a good support system, and you know what to expect with treatment.
- **Manage the anxiety with support.** Rather than ignoring your fear, accept that you will feel some anxiety, and learn to manage that with the help of a support group, a counselor, or a proactive hobby like journaling. Thinking and talking about your fears can relieve the uncertainty and instill more confidence.

Although you can’t control whether or not your cancer comes back, you can control your fear of recurrence.

Use your follow-up appointments to gain more knowledge about patterns of liver cancer recurrence, a good self-care plan, and symptoms or changes to watch for. The more informed you are, the better your ability to overcome uncertainty.