What Are the Symptoms of Liver Cancer?

by KRYSTINA OSTERMEYER

Liver Cancer Symptoms to Be Aware Of

If you've been diagnosed with liver cancer, it can be a shock. Often the beginning stages of liver cancer exhibit nonspecific symptoms — or sometimes no symptoms at all.

What Are Symptoms of Liver Cancer?

- Weight loss
- Loss of appetite
- Feeling full after a small meal
- Nausea and vomiting
- Enlargement of the liver (can be felt as a mass under the ribs on the right side)
- Enlargement of the spleen (can be felt as a mass under the ribs on the left side)
- Abdominal pain
- Pain near the shoulder blade
- Fluid build-up in the abdomen
- Itchy skin
- Jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes)
- Generalized weakness
- White, chalky stools

During the early stages of liver cancer, other disorders may develop called paraneoplastic syndromes. Physicians who are adept at recognizing symptoms of paraneoplastic syndromes may be able to diagnose liver cancer earlier.

Symptoms of paraneoplastic symptoms include:

- Elevated calcium levels
- Low blood glucose levels
- Elevated red blood cell count
- Elevated cholesterol levels
- Breast enlargement
- Testicular shrinking in males

With a laundry list of symptoms, liver cancer is actually often not diagnosed until later stages. This is because sometimes people have no symptoms. Other times, symptoms are nonspecific and may be misdiagnosed for other conditions.

If you've been diagnosed with liver cancer, understanding the possible causes may be helpful. Sometimes, the cause of cancer is not clear. However, there is often a clear-cut cause.

- People with certain strains of hepatitis infections (hepatitis B or hepatitis C) are prone to liver cancer.
- Cirrhosis can cause scar tissue to form, which may increase the chances of developing liver cancer.
- Hemochromatosis, Wilson's disease, and other inherited liver diseases may also increase the risk of liver cancer.
- People with diabetes also have a higher risk of liver cancer.
- Alcoholism leads to liver damage, which increases the risk of developing liver cancer.
- Nonalcoholic fatty liver disease may increase the risk of liver cancer.

Dealing With Persistent Liver Cancer Symptoms

If you've dealt with the symptoms of liver cancer and now have a diagnosis, after you've dealt with the shock, it's time to come up with a game plan for dealing with the symptoms.

Ascites

Treatment of ascites often requires a procedure called a paracentesis, which is essentially when the abdomen is "tapped" and a large amount of fluid is drained. However, sometimes ascites can be treated with reducing sodium intake and a prescription for diuretics, which rids the body of excess fluid by urination.

Jaundice and Itching

Jaundice and itching are symptoms that go hand-in-hand. While you can't treat jaundice at home and make it go away, you can treat the itching that accompanies jaundice.

Purchasing heavy creams can help keep the skin moist and less prone to itching. However, an oral medication called cholestyramine is often prescribed by your doctor to help with this type of itching.

Nausea and Vomiting

Nausea and vomiting can be treated using home remedies:

- Eating small, frequent meals
- Eat bland foods, such as the BRAT diet (bananas, rice, applesauce, and toast)
- Drink water, beverages with electrolytes, broths
- Avoid foods that are known to cause gastric upset, such as high fat, greasy foods and very sweet foods

For nausea and vomiting that is intractable, it is a good idea to speak with your doctor about further treatment, as there are oral medications that can help relieve these symptoms.

Weakness

The fatigue associated with your liver cancer may be caused by any number of things: it could be caused by the cancer itself, by nutritional deficiencies if you've had nausea and vomiting and have had a hard time eating well, or by your treatment.

How you fight the weakness probably depends on the cause of your weakness and fatigue.

If your nutrition is to blame, it may be hard to get the right nutrients in if you're constantly fighting to eat. You may need to talk to your doctor about oral medications to fight the nausea or boost your appetite. You could also schedule an appointment with a registered dietitian who specializes in dietary needs of cancer patients.

If the cancer itself is causing fatigue, self-care is important: rest and ask for help when needed, and try to get a little bit of exercise at a time of day when you feel the most energy. These tips can also apply to fatigue caused by treatment of cancer.

Knowing the symptoms and the possible causes of liver cancer can’t necessarily stop the cancer from forming, but may be helpful in obtaining a diagnosis early in the disease.