

Doctor Says



Dr Sheikh Anwar Abdullah

De-LIVER-ing Good Health

Your liver is the largest internal organ in your body. It is located below your right ribs and is just underneath your right lung and diaphragm, which is the main muscle group responsible for respiration.

Your liver performs vital functions, like processing and storing many of the nutrients absorbed by your intestines, making some of the clotting elements of your blood, and also producing the bile that is secreted into the intestine to help with nutrient absorption. Another vital function carried out by your liver is the removal of toxic wastes from your body.

This article focuses on primary liver cancer, where the cancer originates from the liver itself, or hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC).

Globally, HCC is the 6th most common cancer in the world.¹ In Malaysia, it is the 10th most common cancer overall, and the 5th most common cancer amongst men.²

Risk factors of liver cancer

Certain risk factors may indicate whether a person is more likely to develop liver cancer than another. Studies have found the following risk factors for liver cancer:

- **Gender:** Men are twice as likely as women to get liver cancer.
- **Infection:** The hepatitis B virus (HBV) or hepatitis C virus (HCV) increases your risk of liver cancer. Cancer is not transmissible, but HBV and HCV infections are contagious.
- **Smoking and alcohol.**
- **Cirrhosis:** A serious condition where liver cells are damaged and replaced with scarred tissue; commonly caused by HBV or HCV infection and heavy alcohol usage.
- **Iron storage disease (hemochromatosis):** This disease causes your body to store too much iron in the liver and other internal organs.
- **Obesity and diabetes:** Studies have shown that the risk for developing liver cancer is higher for people with obesity and diabetes.
- **Family history:** If any of your family members have liver cancer, then you may also be at risk of developing this disease.

Symptoms

Liver cancer seldom causes symptoms in the early stages. Symptoms usually occurs once the cancer has grown larger, and may include:

- unexplained weight loss
- continuous lack of appetite
- feeling full after a small meal
- a lump or pain in the area where your liver is located

- a swollen abdomen
- persistent stomach pain that extends to your back and shoulders
- yellowish skin hue or jaundiced eyes
- increased symptoms of illness in those who have chronic hepatitis or cirrhosis

The above symptoms could be caused by liver cancer, but can also be caused by other cancers or conditions. If you have any of these symptoms, see your doctor immediately for a diagnosis and relevant treatment.

Treatment

Treatment options available: surgery (including liver transplantation), ablation, embolization, targeted therapy, radiation therapy, and chemotherapy. Currently, liver cancer is curable in its early stages and only if the cancer patient is healthy enough to have surgery. If surgery is not a viable option (either due to age or health), then they may opt for other treatments to help improve their quality of life.

Is it preventable?

Primary liver cancer is largely preventable, and the measures that you can take to reduce your exposure to risk factors include:

- **Vaccinate yourself:** All children and high-risk adults should be vaccinated against HBV.
- **Guard against HCV:** Learn all you can about it, especially how it is spread (e.g. via blood transfusion, sharing of contaminated needles by drug users, or having unprotected sex).
- **Avoid alcohol:** Liver cirrhosis can lead to liver cancer.
- **Quit smoking:** Cigarette smoke contains thousands of toxins which are absorbed by your body.
- **Get enough physical activity or exercise:** Sufficient physical activity or exercise helps improves your cardiovascular fitness, strength and flexibility, burns up excess calories to keep you in the best condition of health, and generally helps you feel and think better.

Remember, the key to having good health is a healthy lifestyle. There are no shortcuts or 'magic' pills to take that will ensure good health.

Dr Sheikh Anwar Abdullah is a consultant gastroenterologist of Digestive Health Advisory Board. The author is not associated with and does not endorse any brands or products. For a free digestive health info guide or more information, please contact 03-5621 1408.

Learn more about liver cancer, your risks, and how to minimise it.

Pelajari tentang barah hati, risiko-risiko, dan bagaimana untuk mengurangkannya.

Reference:

¹ Sourced from the World Cancer Research Fund International

² Sourced from Malaysia Cancer Statistics - Data and Figures 2007

Rujukan:

¹ Sumber : The World Cancer Research Fund International

² Sumber: Statistik Barah Malaysia - Data dan Angka-angka 2007