

# Liver Cancer, Secondary (Metastatic Liver Cancer)

Information for people living with cancer

**This information should not be used to diagnose yourself or in place of a doctor's care.**

Secondary liver cancer is cancer that started in another part of your body and has spread to your liver. The original cancer spread through the blood stream or the lymphatic system.

This is also called metastatic liver cancer.

For information about cancer that started in the liver (primary liver cancer), go to our Primary Liver Cancer page: [www.bccancer.bc.ca/health-info/types-of-cancer/digestive-system/liver](http://www.bccancer.bc.ca/health-info/types-of-cancer/digestive-system/liver)

The liver does many things in your body:

- Removes toxins from your blood.
- Makes bile and enzymes to help with digestion.
- Makes proteins that help the blood clot.
- Controls the level of cholesterol in the body.
- Stores glycogen (sugar) which your body uses for energy.

Your liver is your body's largest internal organ. It can weigh up to 1.8 kg (4 pounds).

Your liver is on the upper right side of your abdomen. Image of liver:

<https://visualsonline.cancer.gov/retrieve.cfm?imageid=9077&dpi=72&fileformat=jpg>

## Diagnosis and Staging

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What are the signs and symptoms of secondary liver cancer?

- Enlarged liver (liver is larger than normal).
- Hard or tender liver.

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- Enlarged spleen.
- Mild pain in the upper right part of your abdomen.
- Pain in right shoulder.
- Weakness in arms and legs.
- Dizziness.
- Weight loss.
- Loss of appetite
- Fever.
- Nausea.
- Lethargy (lack of energy).
- Jaundice (when the whites of your eyes and your skin turn yellow).
- Ascites (fluid build-up in your abdominal cavity).
- In advanced disease, the liver cannot remove toxins from your blood.

If you have any signs or symptoms that you are worried about, please talk to your family doctor or nurse practitioner.

## How is secondary liver cancer diagnosed?

Tests that may help diagnose secondary liver cancer include:

- **Biopsy:** a surgeon takes a small sample of the tumour. A specialist (pathologist) looks at the sample under a microscope. This will tell us if the cancer is primary or secondary liver cancer. If it is secondary cancer, the cells will look like abnormal cells of the tissue where the cancer started. A biopsy is usually only done for liver cancers that cannot be removed by surgery.
- **Imaging tests to see the tumour and if the cancer has spread:**
  - **X-ray.**

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- **CT** (computed tomography) scan.
- **MRI** (magnetic resonance imaging).
- **Ultrasound of the liver.**
- **Abdominal exploratory surgery:** when a surgeon looks in your abdomen to see if there is any cancer.
- **Alpha-fetoprotein (AFP) blood test:** This may be helpful but about 30% (30 out of 100) of people with liver cancer do not have high amounts of AFP in their blood.

For more information on tests used to diagnose cancer, see our Screening and Diagnosis pathfinder: [bccancer.libguides.com/pathfinder-screening](http://bccancer.libguides.com/pathfinder-screening)

## What are the types and stages of secondary liver cancer?

There is no type or stage for secondary liver cancer. Please read about the type and stage of where your cancer first started.

## Treatment

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### What is the treatment for secondary liver cancer?

Cancer treatment may be different for each person. It depends on your particular cancer. Your treatment may be different from what is listed here.

The type of treatment you get depends on where the cancer first started and what type of cancer you have. It also depends on how much the cancer has spread.

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## Surgery

- The cancer may be removed if it is only in one area of the liver and if there are only a few tumours.
- Cancers that started in the colon and rectum may be removed.
- Cancers that started in other parts of the body may be removed if the original cancer is cured and there is no spread outside of the liver.
- The liver is often the first site that cancer spreads to. If surgery is done early enough, the survival rates are usually higher.

## Systemic therapy (chemotherapy)

- Usually only given when the cancer has spread to more than one section of the liver. This is called palliative systemic therapy.
- Palliative systemic therapy cannot cure the cancer. It will help with symptoms and may prolong your life.
- The type of systemic therapy you get and how well your cancer may respond depends on where the cancer started.
- For more information about systemic therapy go to:  
[bccancer.bc.ca/our-services/treatments/systemic-therapy-\(chemotherapy\)](http://bccancer.bc.ca/our-services/treatments/systemic-therapy-(chemotherapy))

## Other treatments

- Chemoembolization, hepatic arterial infusion, radiation with hepatic artery microspheres, alcohol injection and radio-frequency ablation are considered developmental techniques that may be useful in selected patients.

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## What is the follow-up after treatment?

- Follow-up testing and appointments are based on your type of cancer.
- After treatment, you may return to the care of your family doctor or specialist for regular follow-up. If you do not have a family doctor, please talk to your BC Cancer health care team.

## More Information

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### What causes secondary liver cancer and who gets it?

- Secondary liver cancer is cancer that started in another part of the body and has spread to the liver. The original cancer spread through the blood stream or the lymphatic system.
- Cancer easily spreads to the liver because the liver filters most of the blood from other organs.
- Half of all cancers may spread to the liver. It is one of the most common sites for metastatic cancer.
- Cancers of the eye, stomach, pancreas, esophagus, lung, colon, breast and melanoma almost always spread to the liver if they are not stopped in the earlier stages.
- The cancer cells that have spread to the liver look like and behave the same as cells from where the cancer started.

### Can I help prevent secondary liver cancer?

We do not know of any way to prevent secondary liver cancer.

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## Is there screening for secondary liver cancer?

There is no screening program for this cancer.

## Where can I find more information?

- If you have questions about secondary liver cancer, please talk to your health care team.
- Our librarians can help you find the information you need. Visit our Library page: [bccancer.bc.ca/our-services/services/library](http://bccancer.bc.ca/our-services/services/library)
- BC Cancer Library Advanced or Metastatic Cancer pathfinder: [bccancer.libguides.com/pathfinder\\_advanced](http://bccancer.libguides.com/pathfinder_advanced)
- Managing Your Symptoms: [www.bccancer.bc.ca/health-info/coping-with-cancer/managing-symptoms-side-effects](http://www.bccancer.bc.ca/health-info/coping-with-cancer/managing-symptoms-side-effects)
- Emotional Support: [www.bccancer.bc.ca/health-info/coping-with-cancer/emotional-support](http://www.bccancer.bc.ca/health-info/coping-with-cancer/emotional-support)