

Gall bladder cancer

 **Information for patients**
Hepatobiliary



PROUD TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

SHEFFIELD TEACHING HOSPITALS NHS FOUNDATION TRUST



Who will provide my care?

You will be cared for by a number of professionals who work together. These professionals will be specialist in different areas of your care and are collectively named the multidisciplinary team.

The multidisciplinary team meet regularly to discuss all individuals affected by cancer of the gall bladder.

The team consists of professionals who are involved at different stages in your care. Should you wish to make contact with the members of your care team please use the following numbers.

Consultant surgeon:

.....

Secretary to Consultant surgeon:

.....

Nurse Specialist:

.....

Hospital ward:

.....

Other members of the multidisciplinary team:

.....

.....

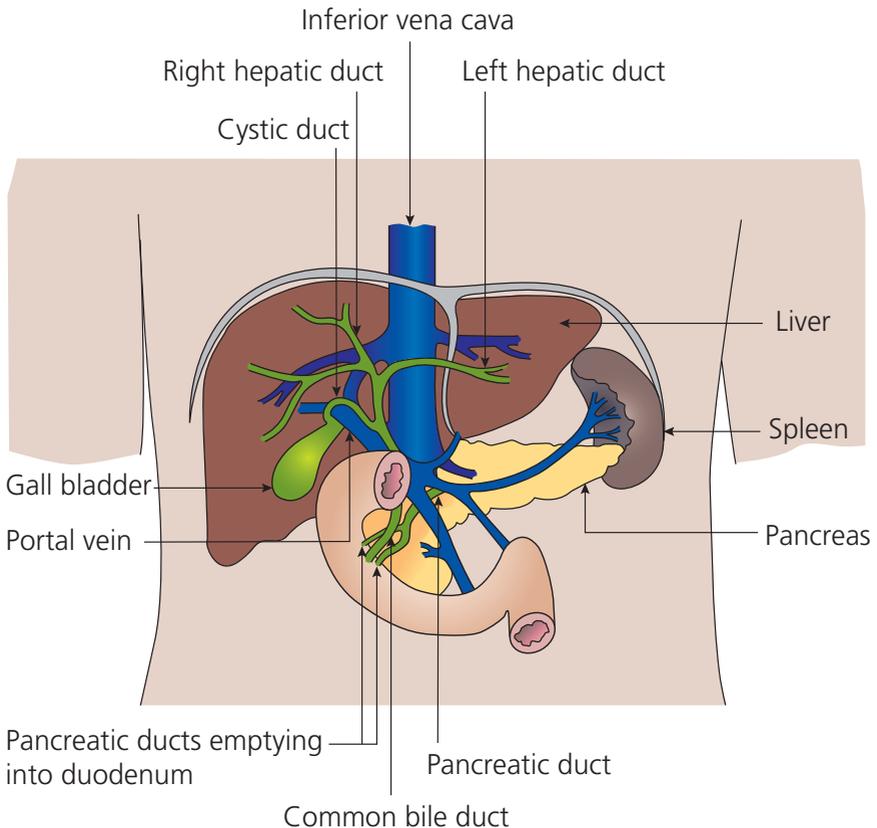
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Definition

Gallbladder cancer is an uncommon malignant disease that arises in the gallbladder.

When gallbladder cancer is discovered at its earliest stages, the chance for a cure is very good. Unfortunately, most gallbladder cancers are discovered at a late stage when spread has already occurred. The gallbladder is located on the right side of the abdomen, tucked away under the ribcage, next to your liver. Cancer of the gallbladder may therefore spread directly out of the gallbladder to your liver or bile duct. It may also spread through the bloodstream to almost any part of the body or to lymph glands within the abdomen.



Gallbladder cancer is difficult to diagnose in the early stages because it often causes no signs or symptoms. When there are also gallstones present in the gall bladder, then any symptoms from the cancer may be attributed to the stones. Another common scenario is that gallbladder cancer may be diagnosed after the gallbladder has been removed for symptoms that were definitely caused by gallstones.

Gallbladder cancer signs and symptoms may include:

- Abdominal pain, particularly in the upper right portion of the abdomen
- Abdominal bloating
- Itchiness
- Fever
- Loss of appetite
- Losing weight without trying
- Jaundice (yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes)

Causes

It is not possible to be clear about what exactly causes gallbladder cancer. In general terms, healthy cells develop changes (mutations) in their DNA. These mutations cause cells to grow out of control and to continue living when other cells would normally die. The accumulating cells form a tumour that can grow beyond the gallbladder and spread to other areas of the body.

We know that gallbladder cancers are more common in women than men, and it tends to occur in older people. There have often been gallstones in the gallbladder for a long time before cancers develop. However, it is important to be clear that gallstones are very common and gallbladder cancer is very uncommon.

Apart from gallstones, other gallbladder conditions that can increase the risk of gallbladder cancer include porcelain gallbladder, a type of gall bladder cyst (choledochal cyst) and chronic gallbladder infection.

Referral to a specialist

The Hepatopancreatobiliary Service at Sheffield Teaching Hospitals specialises in diagnosing and treating conditions of the liver, gallbladder, and bile duct. You will see a surgeon who operates on the liver or gallbladder, or a doctor who specialises in treating cancer (oncologist). You will also be able to see a Clinical Nurse Specialist. You encourage you to:

- **Bring a list of all medications**, as well as any vitamins or supplements that you're taking.
- **Bring a family member or friend along**, if possible. Sometimes it can be difficult to absorb all the information provided during an appointment. Someone who accompanies you may remember something that you missed or have forgotten.
- **Write down questions to ask your doctor.**

In addition to the questions that you've prepared to ask your doctor, don't hesitate to ask questions during your appointment if you don't understand something.

Diagnosing gallbladder cancer

Tests and procedures used to diagnose gallbladder cancer include blood tests to evaluate your liver function and imaging tests. These include ultrasound, computerised tomography (CT) and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI).

Further tests may be needed to find the extent (stage) of your cancer. Your cancer's stage helps determine your prognosis and your treatment options. Tests and procedures used to stage gallbladder cancer include

further scans and laparoscopic (keyhole) surgery to look inside your abdomen for signs of spread.

What treatment is available?

Treatment options will depend on the stage of your cancer, your overall health and your preferences. The initial goal of treatment is to remove the gallbladder cancer, but when that isn't possible, other therapies may help control the spread of the disease and keep you as comfortable as possible.

Gallbladder cancers detected after surgery for gallstones

A fairly common situation is that you have had your gallbladder removed for gallstones and a small cancer has been discovered when the gallbladder was examined under the microscope. This can usually be regarded as a fortunate presentation as the cancer is frequently discovered at a very early stage. You may benefit from further surgery that might reduce the risk of a tumour coming back. This depends upon the histological details of the cancer.

It might be recommended to you that a further operation is carried out to remove a part of the liver next to the gallbladder, together with the lymph glands near the site of the gallbladder. Sometimes we also recommend removal of the bile duct and the scars that were created if you had laparoscopic (keyhole) surgery of the gallbladder. This operation is not carried out by laparoscopic surgery and does involve a long wound. The aim of such surgery is to remove the areas that are most likely to harbour microscopic disease inside the abdomen. After this, the risk of tumour recurrence is lower, but does not completely go away.

Treatment of early stage gallbladder cancer detected by scans

Surgery may be an option if you have an early-stage gallbladder cancer detected by radiological scans. Depending on how certain we can be that there is a cancer, we might recommend surgery to remove the gallbladder (cholecystectomy), and this is usually carried out with an open (not keyhole) approach in this situation.

Gallbladder cancer that extends beyond the gallbladder and into the liver is sometimes treated with surgery to remove the gallbladder, as well as a portion of the liver and bile ducts that surround the gallbladder.

It's not clear whether additional treatments after successful surgery can increase the chances that your gallbladder cancer won't return. Some studies have found this to be the case, so in some instances, your doctor may recommend chemotherapy, radiation therapy or a combination of both after surgery. Still, this is controversial because few studies have tested these additional treatments.

Treatments for late-stage gallbladder cancer

Surgery can't cure gallbladder cancer that has spread beyond the gallbladder. Instead, doctors use treatments that may relieve signs and symptoms of cancer and make you as comfortable as possible. Options may include:

- **Chemotherapy.** Chemotherapy is a drug treatment that uses chemicals to kill cancer cells.
- **Procedures to relieve blocked bile ducts.**

Advanced gallbladder cancer can cause blockages in the bile ducts, causing further complications. Procedures to relieve the blockage may help. For instance, surgeons can place a hollow metal tube (stent) in a duct to hold it open using techniques of endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography (ERCP), or percutaneous transhepatic cholangiography (PTC). Occasionally surgery is needed to bypass bile duct blockages.

Coping and support

Learning you have any life-threatening illness can be devastating. But coping with a diagnosis of gallbladder cancer can be especially difficult because the disease often carries a poor prognosis. Some ideas for learning to cope with gallbladder cancer include:

- **Ask questions about gallbladder cancer.** Write down any questions you have about your cancer. Ask these questions at your next appointment. Also ask your doctor for other reliable sources where you can get more information. Knowing more about your gallbladder cancer and your treatment options may make you more comfortable when it comes to making decisions about your care.
- **Stay connected to friends and family.** Your cancer diagnosis can be stressful for friends and family too. Try to keep them involved in your life. Your friends and family will likely ask if there's anything they can do to help you. Think of tasks you might like help with, such as caring for your home if you have to stay in the hospital or just being there when you want to talk. You may find comfort in the support of a caring group of friends and family.
- **Find someone to talk with.** Find someone you can talk to who has experience with people facing a life-threatening illness. Consult a counsellor, medical social worker, clergy member or a support group for people with cancer.
- **Write down your medical wishes.** Take steps to ensure that your end-of-life wishes are known and respected. Ask your doctor about advance directives, which allow you to indicate what types of treatment you'd like in the event you can't communicate your wishes. Also ask about designating a medical power of attorney, which is someone you designate to make your choices for you if you can't communicate.

Other contacts you may find helpful

Cavendish Centre for Cancer Care

Offers support, assessment and a range of complimentary therapies for patients and their carers. All services are provided free of charge and referrals are taken directly from you.

- **0114 278 4600**

Cancer Support Centre

Provide support and information on an informal basis.

- **0114 226 5391**

Macmillan Cancer Support

- **0845 601 6161**
- **www.macmillan.org.uk**



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