About Gallbladder Cancer

Overview and Types

If you have been diagnosed with gallbladder cancer or are worried about it, you likely have a lot of questions. Learning some basics is a good place to start.

- What Is Gallbladder Cancer?

Research and Statistics

See the latest estimates for new cases of gallbladder cancer and deaths in the US and what research is currently being done.

- What Are the Key Statistics About Gallbladder Cancer?
- What’s New in Gallbladder Cancer Research and Treatment?

What Is Gallbladder Cancer?

Cancer starts when cells in the body begin to grow out of control. Cells in nearly any part of the body can become cancer, and can spread to other areas of the body. To learn more about how cancers start and spread, see What Is Cancer?

Gallbladder cancer is a cancer that starts in the gallbladder. To understand this cancer, it helps to know about the gallbladder and what it does.

About the gallbladder

The gallbladder is a small, pear-shaped organ under the liver. Both the liver and the gallbladder are behind the right lower ribs. In adults, the gallbladder is usually about 3 to 4 inches long and normally no wider than an inch.
The gallbladder concentrates and stores bile, a fluid made in the liver. Bile helps digest the fats in foods as they pass through the small intestine. Bile is either released from the liver directly into ducts that carry it to the small intestine, or is stored in the gallbladder and released later. When food (especially fatty food) is being digested, the gallbladder contracts and releases bile through a small tube called the cystic duct. The cystic duct joins up with the common hepatic duct, which comes from the liver, to form the common bile duct. The common bile duct joins with the main duct from the pancreas (the pancreatic duct) to empty into the duodenum (the first part of the small intestine) at the ampulla of Vater.
The gallbladder is helpful, but you do not need it to live. Many people have their gallbladders removed and go on to live normal lives.

**Types of gallbladder cancers**

About 9 out of 10 gallbladder cancers are adenocarcinomas. An adenocarcinoma is a cancer that starts in cells with gland-like properties that line many internal and external surfaces of the body (including the inside the digestive system).

Papillary adenocarcinoma or just papillary cancer is a type of gallbladder adenocarcinoma that deserves special mention. When seen under a microscope, the cells in these gallbladder cancers are arranged in finger-like projections. In general, papillary cancers are not as likely to grow into the liver or nearby lymph nodes. They tend to have a better prognosis (outlook) than most other kinds of gallbladder
adenocarcinomas. About 6% of all gallbladder cancers are papillary adenocarcinomas.

Other types of cancer, such as adenosquamous carcinomas, squamous cell carcinomas, small cell carcinomas, and sarcomas, can develop in the gallbladder, but these are uncommon.

- References
See all references for Gallbladder Cancer

Last Medical Review: October 29, 2014 Last Revised: February 5, 2016

What Are the Key Statistics About Gallbladder Cancer?

The American Cancer Society’s estimates for cancer of the gallbladder and nearby large bile ducts in the United States for 2017 are:

- About 11,740 new cases diagnosed: 5,320 in men and 6,420 in women
- About 3,830 deaths from these cancers: 1,630 in men and 2,200 in women

Of these new cases, a little less than 4 in 10 (about 4,000 cases) will be gallbladder cancers.

Gallbladder cancer is not usually found until it has become advanced and causes symptoms. Only about 1 of 5 gallbladder cancers is found in the early stages, when the cancer has not yet spread beyond the gallbladder.

The chances of survival for patients with gallbladder cancer depend to a large extent on how advanced it is when it is found. For statistics on survival rates, see “Survival statistics for gallbladder cancer by stage.”

Visit the American Cancer Society’s Cancer Statistics Center for more key statistics.

- References
See all references for Gallbladder Cancer
What’s New in Gallbladder Cancer Research and Treatment?

Research into the causes, diagnosis, and treatment of gallbladder cancer is under way in many medical centers throughout the world.

Chemotherapy and radiation therapy

Researchers are looking at new ways of increasing the effectiveness of radiation therapy. With newer techniques such as 3-dimensional conformal radiation therapy (3D-CRT), intensity modulated radiation therapy (IMRT), and proton beam radiation therapy, doctors can better aim radiation to affect only the tumor and to spare nearby normal tissues. Doctors have also found that giving certain chemotherapy drugs just before radiation therapy may make it more effective.

In general, chemotherapy (chemo) has been found to be of limited use against gallbladder cancer, but newer drugs and combinations of drugs are now being tested.

Targeted therapy

Newer drugs are being developed that work in different ways from standard chemo drugs. These drugs target specific parts of cancer cells or their surrounding environments. Many of these newer drugs target cells with specific gene changes. As noted in “Do we know what causes gallbladder cancer?”, researchers now know some of the gene changes commonly found in gallbladder cancer cells. Knowing which genes are abnormal could help doctors determine which of these new drugs might be effective.

One target of several newer drugs is tumor blood vessels. Gallbladder tumors need new blood vessels to grow beyond a certain size. Bevacizumab (Avastin®) and pazopanib (Votrient®) are examples of drugs that target blood vessel growth and are being studied.
Other new drugs have different targets. For example, EGFR is a protein found in high amounts on some cancer cells that helps them grow. Drugs that target EGFR have shown some benefit against several types of cancer. Some of these, such as cetuximab (Erbitux®) and lapatinib (Tykerb®), are now being studied for use in people with gallbladder cancer, usually in combination with chemotherapy or other targeted drugs.

Drugs known as MEK inhibitors, such as trametinib (Mekinist®) and selumetinib, are also being studied for use against gallbladder cancer.

*References*

See all references for Gallbladder Cancer