

Regular checks for liver cancer (surveillance)



Liver cancer is more common in people who have significant scarring of the liver, known as cirrhosis. But finding it early means it can often be cured. Doctors use regular checks called 'surveillance' to help find cancer early.

Most people with cirrhosis will not get liver cancer. It's up to you whether you take part. It's important to know that:

- Taking part every 6 months can find liver cancer at an early stage when it can be cured
- Some cancers are missed
- Some people are still diagnosed with liver cancer that can't be cured
- Some people have extra tests but don't have cancer

The checks are every 6 months to help find any signs of cancer as soon as possible. So if you have them, it's really important to go every time. Even if you feel well and your liver disease isn't causing problems.



What happens in your liver cancer checks?

Liver cancer checks are usually organised by your local hospital liver unit. You should get an invitation by letter or via the NHS App a few weeks before that tells you the time of your appointment and where you need to go. This is a prompt for you to book a blood test. If you can't go at the time in the letter, you can get in touch to change to a better time by phoning the number on the invitation letter or on the NHS app.

There are 2 tests that can form part of liver cancer checks.

- A liver ultrasound scan will normally be included.
- Some hospitals also carry out a blood test for alpha-fetoprotein (AFP).



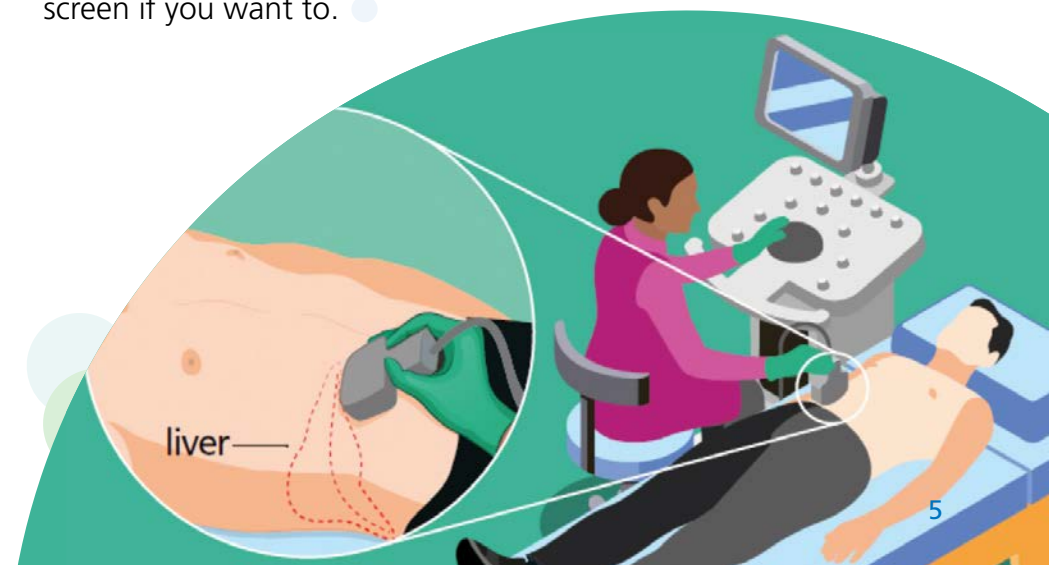
Having an ultrasound

The ultrasound scan takes about 15 to 30 minutes. It doesn't hurt. The scan will be of your belly (abdomen) area so, it's a good idea to wear something that makes it easy to take off or pull up your top, like a t-shirt with trousers or a skirt.

A doctor or a radiographer will do the scan. They hold a small wand, a bit like a microphone, against your belly and move it around. You have some lubricating gel put on your belly to help the wand move smoothly and stay in contact with your skin. The gel usually feels cold, but other than that and the probe moving you shouldn't feel anything. Some people call this the 'jelly scan' because of the gel used on your skin.

It's important not to eat or drink for a few hours before the scan. If this will be a problem, for example, if you live with diabetes, contact the hospital for advice. There should be a number in your invitation letter.

If you have been diagnosed with liver disease for a while, you've probably had an ultrasound scan before. The scan uses very high-pitched soundwaves to build up a computer picture of your liver and other organs. You can ask to see the scan on the computer screen if you want to.



Blood tests

You might also have blood taken to test for AFP. AFP is a chemical called a tumour-marker, which means that it can be found in the blood of people with cancer, including liver cancer. AFP isn't a perfect test for liver cancer because levels can be normal in people with early liver cancer and it can also be raised for reasons other than cancer.



Your results

Your results are sent to the doctor in charge of your care who will let you know if you need to have any more tests. If you would like to know your results, you can contact your doctor. Often results will show on the NHS app or hospital portal.

If the ultrasound shows a new abnormality or there is a large increase in your blood AFP level you will be offered further tests. This will usually be a CT or MRI scan.

It's important to remember that ultrasound and AFP tests aren't perfect. Your doctor will explain what is happening and answer any questions you have. You can also call the British Liver Trust nurse helpline on 0800 652 7330 if you have questions, worries or just want to talk.

Who should have regular liver cancer checks?

You will be invited for regular liver cancer checks if you have been diagnosed with cirrhosis.

You will be invited for regular liver cancer checks if:

- you have been diagnosed with cirrhosis
- you are over 40 and live with long term hepatitis B
- for a reason discussed with you in the clinic

People who are seriously ill with liver disease and are having end of life care aren't invited for these checks.

It's your choice whether to have liver cancer checks. If you aren't sure whether you should be having these checks, talk to your clinical team.



Information and support for you

Use your phone camera to scan the QR codes and find out more.

British Liver Trust website:

britishlivertrust.org.uk/regular-checks-for-liver-cancer

The UK's leading liver health charity working to improve liver health for all and supporting those affected by liver disease or cancer.

The link between liver disease and liver cancer



Liver cancer happens when the cells that make up your liver go out of control. They grow and multiply too much. Over time the cancer cells make a lump called a tumour. The tumour can grow into nearby areas and sometimes cancer cells can break off and spread to other parts of the body.

Damage to the genetic instructions inside the liver cells is what causes them to lose control. In cirrhosis, your liver gets damaged over and over again and has to grow more cells than usual to try to repair the damage. This increases the chances of something going wrong with the genetic information that could lead to cancer.

Up to 9 in 10 people who have hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) liver cancer also have cirrhosis.

Liver disease and liver cancer share a lot of the same causes. Hepatitis B and C viruses, drinking too much alcohol and carrying extra bodyweight have all been shown to cause liver cancer as well as causing liver damage and cirrhosis. Smoking can cause liver cancer, as well as worsening the effect of other risks such as alcohol and viral hepatitis.