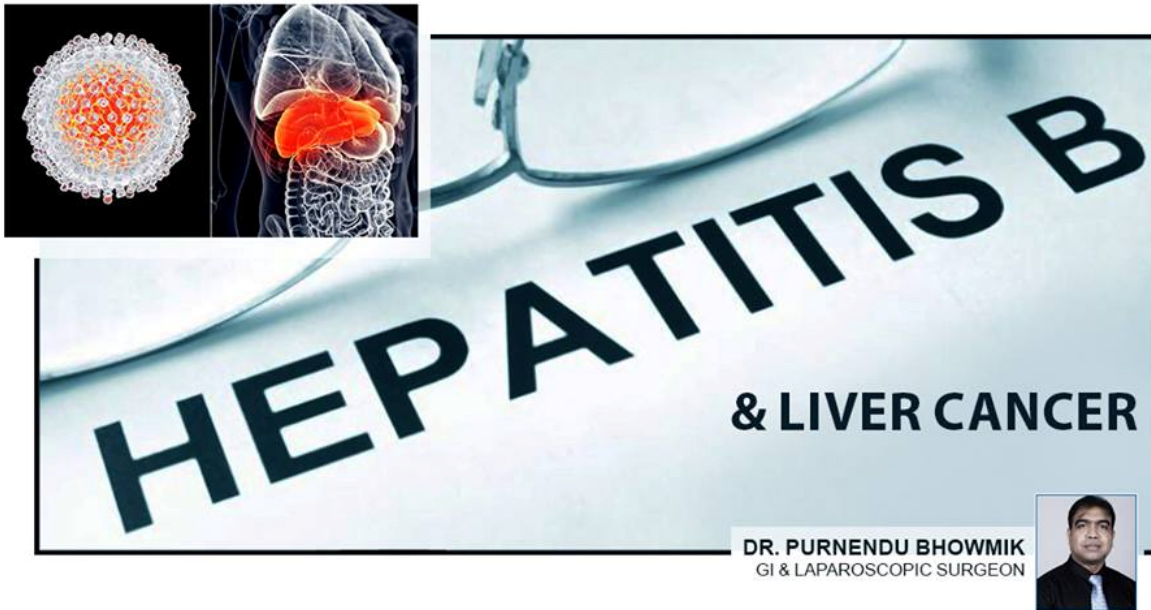


Does Hepatitis B Cause Liver Cancer?



The most common risk factor for liver cancer is chronic infection with the hepatitis B virus. Individuals chronically infected with hepatitis B have a 25% to 40% lifetime risk of developing liver cancer.

A typical patient would be somebody born with hepatitis B infection contracted from his/her mother at birth (common in Asia). The baby's immature immune system does not recognize the hepatitis B virus as "foreign" and thus tolerates the virus. (The body's immune system does not wage war against the virus.) The hepatitis B virus is able to multiply and flourish in the body without causing the hepatitis (liver inflammation caused by the immune system) that leads to cirrhosis. However, the virus can damage the DNA in the liver cells and cause liver cancer. These patients typically have high levels of hepatitis B virus in their blood but normal liver enzymes and normal liver biopsies. Such patients should have ultrasound examinations of the liver and alpha fetoprotein blood tests every six months to look for developing liver cancers.