

New liver cancer treatment raises 2-year survival rate

HEALTH

NEW LIVER CANCER TREATMENT RAISES 2-YEAR SURVIVAL RATE

Combination of therapies shrinks tumours enough for them to be removed in half of 33 patients

Sammy Heung
sammy.heung@scmp.com

A new way of treating liver cancer patients can increase their two-year survival rate by at least 20 per cent, Hong Kong researchers have said.

According to a study by the [University of Hong Kong \(HKU\)](#), a combination of three conventional treatments was successful in shrinking the tumours of half of 33 patients suffering from intermediate or late-stage liver cancer, reducing their size enough to allow for their removal.

"What is unique about this approach is that we are actually incorporating three modalities into this combination treatment strategy," Clinical Professor Albert Chan Chi-yan said. "By doing that we can raise the efficacy from 10 per cent of complete cancer clearance to up to 50 per cent."

Chan added that in the past, only 30 per cent of liver cancer patients were suitable for tumour removal surgeries.

Others would receive only one of the three types of treatment, but only 10 per cent of them could be completely cured.

"We were not happy about this result and tried to improve it. We tried to turn this miracle into a frequent occurrence," he said.

The study has been published

in the British medical journal the *Lancet*.

The patients, who initially had tumours ranging in size from 5cm to 17.5cm, received the treatments between March 2019 and January 2021. They were initially not eligible to have the growth removed for reasons such as its size or position.

After the treatments, which normally took six months, the tumours of 31 patients shrank, with 22 of them seeing the growths reduced in size by 30 per cent.

Eighteen patients became

suitable for tumour removal and four of them underwent the operation.

More than 90 per cent of the 18 patients survived two years after the treatment, with the average exceeding 30 months, compared to 50 per cent to 70 per cent of those who did not receive the new treatment.

Patients would first receive transarterial chemoembolisation (TACE), which would kill part of the cancerous cells, followed by stereotactic body radiation therapy (SBRT) to terminate more

compromised cells and activate the immune system, and lastly immunotherapy to stimulate the production of white blood cells to fight the cancer.

Chan said his team hoped to expand the approach to all private and public hospitals in the long term. "We are seeing about 1,800 new cases per year in Hong Kong," he said. "We are talking about over 1,000 patients who are not eligible for surgeries. Out of these 1,000 patients, we anticipate that about half will be eligible for this treatment."

Chan expected between 400 and 600 cancer patients a year could benefit from this approach and 200 to 300 of them could be completely cured.

Clinical Assistant Professor Dr Chiang Chi-leung said phase two of the study had been launched using another type of immunotherapy with a higher efficacy rate and 17 patients had been recruited so far.

Retiree Wan Ying-keung, 68, was diagnosed with liver cancer in early 2020 but was not suitable for surgery because the tumour was too large and close to blood vessels.

The combined treatment shrank his tumour, making the removal operation unnecessary.

"This is so remarkable and I was very happy," he said. "I had an appointment with the doctor yesterday, and he said the tumour had almost gone completely, and of course long-term monitoring is needed, but I am very grateful."

Only patients who are not eligible for removal surgery with growths at least 5cm in size can qualify for the combined treatment. The tumour must not have spread to other organs or invaded major blood vessels.

The new treatment plan is now available at the [Queen Mary Hospital](#). As the TACE and SBRT are fully subsidised by the government at public hospitals, patients would only need to pay about HK\$200,000 for six months of immunotherapy.



From left, Clinical Assistant Professor Chiang Chi-leung, Clinical Professor Albert Chan, and liver cancer patient Wan Ying-keung announce the news yesterday at the [University of Hong Kong](#). Photo: Jonathan Wong



Liver cancer man gets life back in HKU first



Liver cancer man gets life back in HKU first

Ayra Wang

A 65-year-old local man suffering from stage 4 liver cancer was cured after receiving a new “reduce and remove” treatment proposed by clinical professors at the University of Hong Kong.

Wong Lok-wing received that diagnosis last November after an 18.2-centimeter-long tumor was found over his left liver, with the cancer having already spread to nearby veins. He also has severe cirrhosis and has to go to hospital frequently due to the abdominal distension that it caused.

Wong and his son, Nathan Wong Ho-ting, who donated one of his livers to his father, shared their experience at HKU yesterday.

“We went to see many doctors and none said there was a way to cure my father,” Nathan Wong said, adding he was already thinking about how to make his dad more comfortable in the last six months of his life at that time.

Liver cancer ranks as the fifth most common cancer in Hong Kong in 2021 with over 1,700 new cases, according to the Hong Kong Cancer Registry.

However, only 30 percent of liver cancer patients are amenable to currently available treatment options – to resect the liver tumor by operation, said Albert Chan Chi-yan, clinical professor at the department of surgery.

“Patients who are diagnosed with advanced liver cancer or have a poor-functioning liver cannot accept resection operations, as the risk is too high,” Chan said.

But Wong was cured after receiving the “reduce and remove” treatment, which first reduced his tumor to an operable size and then resolved tumor thrombus issues in the veins over a period of six months.

He then received a liver transplantation in August. He was discharged with a 1.5-cm-long tumor, an early stage one tumor and has remained cancer-free so far.

This marks the first reported case worldwide to cure



advanced-stage liver cancer by reducing the tumor to an early stage one and removing it by liver transplantation, Chan said.

“There is no other effective way in the world so far to shrink a stage 4 liver tumor to an operable size,” he said, “and this new treatment effectively prolongs the lives of patients whose tumor stage and size must be reduced before liver transplantation.”

He added that the new treatment could also help save the elderly from liver cancer, as they “are normally not suitable for high-risk and complex surgery.”

“The new treatment involves low invasiveness, and it is safe and well tolerated,” Chan said.

Around 100 patients have accepted the treatment, and 40 percent of them have seen a complete necrosis of the tumor cells after treatment, with more than 10 percent becoming suitable to undergo operations such as liver transplantation.

Chan said the team is working on simplifying the treatment process and urged the government to provide subsidies for medicines used in the treatment to encourage more patients to try it.