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Memorial Sloan Kettering
Cancer Center

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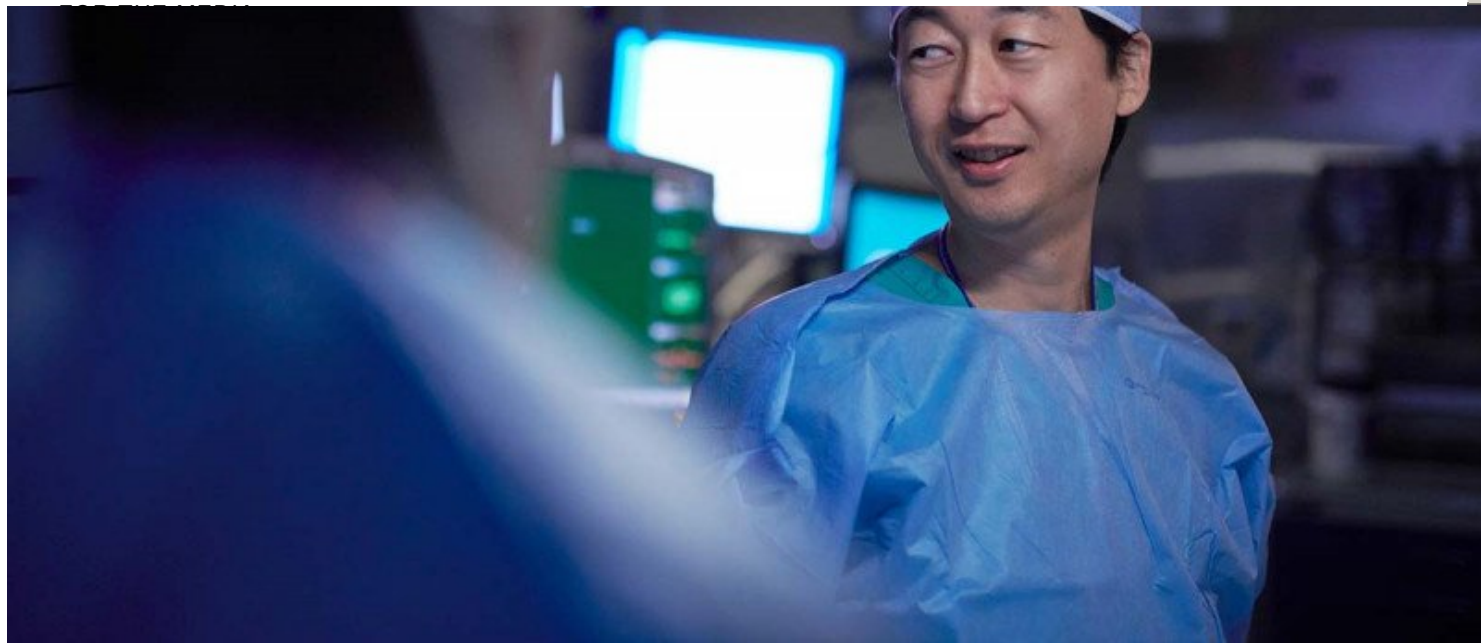
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Gastroenterologist Makato Nishimura specializes in using minimally invasive endoscopic techniques to diagnose and treat gallbladder cancer.

Gallbladder cancer is hard to find early. The gallbladder lies deep inside the body and cannot be felt during routine physical exams. The disease is often diagnosed unexpectedly when the gallbladder is removed to treat gallstones or another condition.

If you have [symptoms](#) that suggest you may have gallbladder cancer, it's vital that your doctor has a clear and complete understanding of what's causing them. When making a diagnosis, our experts take the time to learn about your medical history and understand your overall health. We conduct a thorough physical examination. In addition, you may have some of the following

tests.

Blood Tests

Diagnosing gallbladder cancer may begin with a test to measure the amount of bilirubin in the blood. Bilirubin is a chemical that comes from the breakdown of red blood cells and gives bile its yellow color. A high bilirubin level can mean that the gallbladder or liver is not functioning properly. Other blood tests measure levels of liver enzymes (such as alkaline phosphatase, AST, ALT, and GGT) and can identify abnormal amounts of other substances (such as the proteins CEA and CA 19-9). Finding any of these substances in the blood can indicate the presence of gallbladder cancer.

Imaging

At MSK, we use the latest imaging techniques to pinpoint the exact size and location of newly diagnosed gallbladder tumors. These details help us determine whether a tumor can be removed by [surgery](#). They also help predict a tumor's response to other treatments. Imaging helps guide our surgeons and interventional radiologists during various treatments.

The imaging techniques we use at MSK include:

CT Scans

CT scans take cross-sectional pictures of the body, helping doctors determine if the cancer cells are only in the gallbladder or if they have spread to other areas. At MSK, we use triphasic CT scans. These take images of the gallbladder, liver, bile ducts, and nearby lymph nodes during three phases of blood flow through the liver.

Ultrasound

Ultrasound is useful for detecting the location and number of tumors and whether the tumor involves the main blood vessels. Ultrasound can distinguish whether a mass is cancer or a benign (noncancerous) gallstone disease. Unlike CT, ultrasound does not use radiation.

Magnetic Resonance Cholangiopancreatography

This technique uses magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to show how much a tumor has grown within the gallbladder. It helps doctors determine if the tumor can be removed by surgery. More detailed MRI may be needed to see if the tumor has spread to the liver or other organs.

Positron Emission Tomography

PET scans can detect whether cancer has spread from the gallbladder to other tissues or organs. PET and CT scans are sometimes used together (PET-CT) to pinpoint the exact location of tumors.

Other Diagnostic Techniques

We may do other tests to learn more about the extent of the tumor and the types of cells involved. These are often performed in an outpatient setting.

Biopsy

During a biopsy, a doctor removes a small amount of tissue from the area where the cancer is suspected. At MSK, we use an image-guided technique called fine needle aspiration to get this sample of gallbladder cancer. This procedure is usually performed by an interventional radiologist (a doctor who specializes in minimally invasive techniques).

Endoscopy

This technique involves inserting an endoscope (a long, narrow tube attached to a camera and light) through the mouth and down the throat to examine the gallbladder.

Laparoscopy

In this procedure, a doctor inserts a laparoscope (a thin lighted tube with a camera on its tip) through a small incision (cut) in the abdominal wall to look at the organs in the belly or pelvis. The doctor can then see the size of the cancer and if it has spread to other organs and lymph nodes. This evaluation is also called staging. Tissue samples may be removed for a biopsy during a laparoscopy as well.

Surgery

Sometimes a gallbladder tumor is too small to do a biopsy. If cancer is suspected, surgery to remove the tumor may be necessary to confirm the diagnosis.

Request an Appointment

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Available Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. (Eastern time)

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