The liver is the largest organ inside the body and is a very important metabolic organ for breaking down harmful substances e.g. alcohol, drugs etc., among other functions. The liver is situated in the upper right part of the abdomen, comprising the left and right lobes.

Liver cancer results from abnormal growth of liver cells. The most common liver cancer is Hepatocellular Carcinoma (HCC) which accounts for over half of all liver cancer death cases locally.

Am I at risk of liver cancer?
The major risk factors for HCC include:
- Chronic infection with hepatitis B virus (HBV) and hepatitis C virus (HCV)
- Cirrhosis
- Alcoholic consumption
- Ingestion of foods contaminated with aflatoxin (a toxin found in some food, such as mouldy peanuts and grains)

Other risk factors include diabetes, obesity, smoking, long term use of oral contraceptives and certain hereditary conditions such as haemochromatosis, glycogen storage disease and Wilson’s disease.

What are the common symptoms of liver cancer?
Early stage of liver cancer usually has no symptoms and may not be easily noticed.

Common symptoms include unexplainable weight loss, skin and eye yellowing, nausea, dark urine, pale stool, abdominal pain and swelling.

You should consult a doctor as soon as possible if you develop any of the above symptoms.

How to reduce the chance of getting liver cancer?
- Vaccinate against HBV
- Avoid drinking alcohol
- Do not smoke
- Avoid unprotected sexual intercourse or sharing needles
- Avoid food source of aflatoxins, such as mouldy peanuts and grains
- Maintain healthy diet and body weight

Two common tests used for this purpose are:
- Alpha-fetoprotein (AFP) test:
  When liver cancer cells grow continuously, the blood AFP level may increase. However, blood AFP level is frequently normal during early stage and thus may not be reliable for detecting small liver cancer. On the other hand, blood AFP level can also be raised in conditions other than liver cancer.
  
- Abdominal ultrasound:
  Ultrasound uses reflected sound waves to produce an image of the organs and other structures in the upper abdomen including liver. However it may not be able to detect small liver tumour. Its performance is affected by various factors such as abdominal fatness. It may be used in conjunction with AFP test to give more informative results.

What is liver cancer screening?
The purpose of liver cancer screening is to detect liver cancer before it gives rise to symptoms, so that early treatment can be initiated.

Should I get screened?
Routine liver cancer screening is not recommended for persons at average risk.

People at increased risk of liver cancer, namely carriers of hepatitis B virus (HBV) or hepatitis C virus (HCV), and those with cirrhosis regardless of cause, should consult their doctor to discuss about the need of periodic liver cancer screening with AFP test and ultrasound every 6 to 12 months by specialists.