

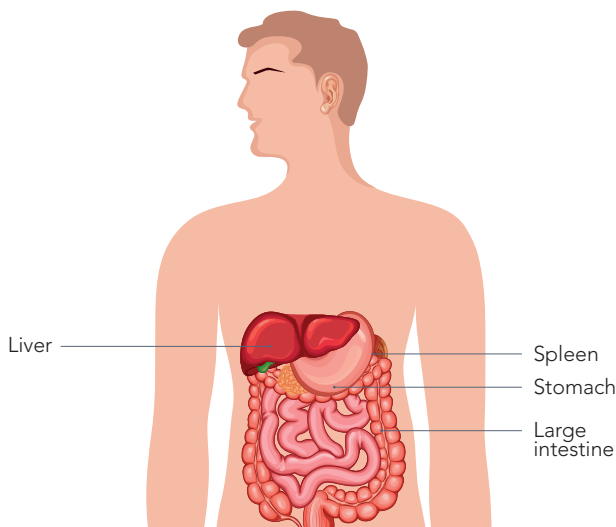
Spleen: When it has been removed or is not working properly

Health information after cancer treatment as a child or teenager

The purpose of this factsheet is to tell you about long-term side effects (called 'late effects') that can happen after having cancer treatment. They can happen soon after treatment has finished or later in life. The medical team at the hospital where you received your treatment or your long-term follow-up team will be able to help you with specific information about which late effects are relevant to you.

What is the spleen?

The spleen is an organ in your abdomen which helps your body to fight infections by producing antibodies and filtering bacteria from the blood. Some cancer treatments, usually surgery or radiotherapy, can stop the spleen from functioning normally and increase your risk of developing serious bacterial infections.



Who is at risk?

The common treatments that can affect your spleen include:

- removal of your spleen during surgery (splenectomy)
- radiation to your spleen (when your whole abdomen or left side of your abdomen was treated)
- total body irradiation
- some stem cell transplants (your consultant will inform you if this applies to you)

What problems can occur if your spleen has been removed or does not work properly?

People without a spleen or those with a non-functioning spleen are at greater risk of developing infections that can be life-threatening. The most common infections are those caused by the following bacteria: streptococcus pneumoniae, haemophilus influenzae, and neisseria meningitidis.

How can I tell if I am developing an infection?

One of the most common signs of infection is fever. Fever may be caused by a virus (like a cold or flu) or it may be a harmful bacteria. At first, it can be difficult to know if bacteria is the cause of a fever. Therefore, it is important that serious infections are treated with antibiotics until a blood culture has been done and the results are available.

If you develop a fever (temperature over 38°C), you must consult your doctor immediately and make sure they are aware you have a non-functioning spleen.

Other symptoms of infection include:

- muscle aches
- shivering
- diarrhoea and being sick
- abdominal pain
- cough
- headache

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What can I do to help prevent infections?

There are two approaches to reduce your chance of developing a serious infection:

Immunisations

It is important to make sure you are vaccinated against:

- pneumococcus, with lifelong 5-yearly boosters
- haemophilus influenzae type B (Hib)
- meningitis A, C, W, Y and B

In addition, you should have the flu vaccine every Autumn.

Antibiotics

Immunisations do not provide total protection so you should also take preventative antibiotics twice a day, every day for life, to try and prevent serious infections developing. The antibiotics used are usually penicillin or erythromycin (or similar antibiotics).

You should always have an extra supply of antibiotics at home for emergency use and make sure they are still in date. Take these immediately if you develop symptoms of an infection whilst seeking medical help. Remember to take these with you when you are travelling, especially abroad.

Are there any other infections to be aware of?

- malaria can be particularly serious if your spleen is absent or non-functioning – either avoid travelling to areas of high risk, or ensure you take prophylactic antimalarial medication for the recommended duration and use insect repellent and other protective measures
- animal or human bites that break the skin must receive medical attention
- ticks can transmit infections, so discuss tick bites with your GP or healthcare team

How will healthcare teams know about my spleen if I am unwell?

Make sure you always tell your doctor, dentist, or other health professionals caring for you, about your non-functioning spleen. It is a good idea to wear a MedicAlert disc in case you cannot tell the team in an emergency. You should also carry an alert card which your long-term follow-up team can provide you with.

Where can I find more information?

The NHS has a range of information about Spleen issues
www.nhs.uk/conditions/spleen-problems-and-spleen-removal/

GOV.UK

www.gov.uk/government/publications/splenectomy-leaflet-and-card/information-for-patients-with-an-absent-or-dysfunctional-spleen#splenectomy



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Written by CCLG Late Effects Group, a national network of experts who specialise in looking after young cancer survivors, in conjunction with the CCLG Information Advisory Group, comprising multiprofessional experts in the field of children's cancer. If you have any comments on this factsheet, please contact us. CCLG publications on a variety of topics related to children's cancer are available to order or download free of charge from our website.

Children's Cancer and Leukaemia Group (CCLG) is a leading national charity and expert voice for all childhood cancers.

Each week in the UK and Ireland, more than 30 children are diagnosed with cancer. Our network of dedicated professional members work together in treatment, care and research to help shape a future where all children with cancer survive and live happy, healthy and independent lives.

We fund and support innovative world-class research and collaborate, both nationally and internationally, to drive forward improvements in childhood cancer. Our award-winning information resources help lessen the anxiety, stress and loneliness commonly felt by families, giving support throughout the cancer journey.

Our work is funded by donations. If you would like to help, text 'CCLG' to 70300 to donate £3. You may be charged for one text message at your network's standard or charity rate. CCLG (registered charity numbers 1182637 and SC049948) will receive 100% of your donation.