New Meds for Liver Cancer

Cabometyx is the third liver cancer drug approved in the past six months.

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With the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approval of three new treatments in the past six months, liver cancer has entered a new era of options.

Hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC), the most common type of liver cancer, doesn't respond well to chemotherapy. The first targeted therapy for HCC, Nexavar (sorafenib), was approved in 2007. A decade passed before the FDA OK'd another targeted drug, Stivarga (regorafenib), and the first immunotherapy for HCC, Opdivo (nivolumab).

But then the number of liver cancer drugs doubled in just a year. The FDA approved Lenvima (lenvatinib) last August, Keytruda (pembrolizumab) in November and Cabometyx (cabozantinib) in January. Cabometyx and Lenvima—like Nexavar and Stivarga—are kinase inhibitors that block enzymes that play a role in cell growth and blood vessel development. Keytruda and Opdivo are PD-1 checkpoint inhibitors that help immune cells fight cancer.

These medications don't work for everyone, and they can stop working if the cancer develops resistance. But having more options makes it easier to put together a sequence of treatments to keep liver cancer under control.

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