When to transplant, when to suppress: Age, donor, and severity in the decision

Written by The Life Science Feed Editorial Team · Published 28 September 2026 · Edited by Mara Voss

The decision between upfront transplantation and a course of immunosuppression or other systemic therapies presents a complex clinical dilemma, requiring careful consideration of patient age, disease severity, and donor availability. This challenge is particularly evident in conditions like biliary tract cancer, where evolving systemic therapies are redefining what constitutes resectable disease and opening new avenues for multidisciplinary curative strategies.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The Pivot: Novel systemic therapies, including molecularly targeted therapy and immunotherapy, are redefining resectability in biliary tract cancer, making conversion surgery a viable multidisciplinary strategy for previously unresectable disease.
- The Data: While opportunities exist, the precise criteria for patient selection and the optimal timing of surgical intervention remain under investigation.
- The Action: Clinicians should thoroughly evaluate molecular markers in patients with initially unresectable BTC to determine if a period of targeted or immunotherapy could facilitate conversion surgery, thereby offering a potential for improved outcomes.

The decision to pursue upfront transplantation versus a course of immunosuppression or other systemic therapies is rarely straightforward. It involves weighing immediate risks against long-term benefits, often in the context of life-threatening diseases where every choice carries significant weight. This complexity is evident across various medical disciplines, from oncology to haematology, where patient age, disease severity, and donor availability frequently dictate the therapeutic path. The guidelines are further complicated by the rapid evolution of systemic therapies, which can alter disease trajectories and create new windows for curative interventions that were once considered impossible. For instance, in conditions like biliary tract cancer, the advent of molecularly targeted therapy and immunotherapy has begun to redefine what constitutes 'resectable' disease, challenging long-held assumptions about surgical candidacy.1

Biliary tract cancer (BTC) exemplifies this shifting paradigm. Historically, many patients with BTC present with locally advanced or metastatic disease, rendering them unsuitable for upfront curative resection. The prognosis for these patients has been notoriously poor. But the emergence of novel systemic agents has opened avenues for 'conversion surgery,' transforming previously unresectable disease into a multidisciplinary curative strategy.1 This approach involves an initial period of systemic therapy to reduce tumor burden or achieve disease control, followed by surgical resection. The challenge lies in identifying the optimal selection criteria for these patients and understanding the precise role of conversion surgery within the broader treatment algorithm. The paper by Okabayashi, Tabuchi, and Tokumaru in Expert

Review of Anticancer Therapy highlights this evolving strategy, noting that while opportunities exist, the criteria for patient selection and the timing of surgical intervention remain uncertain.1

Rethinking Resectability in Biliary Tract Cancer

The traditional view of biliary tract cancer, particularly advanced forms, has often been one of limited surgical options. Patients presenting with locally advanced or metastatic disease were typically managed with palliative chemotherapy, given the high morbidity and low success rates associated with attempts at curative resection in such settings. But the trial pipeline has changed. Molecularly targeted therapies, which home in on specific genetic alterations within cancer cells, and immunotherapies, which harness the body's own immune system to fight cancer, have demonstrated efficacy in BTC. These therapies can lead to significant tumor regression or stabilization, effectively downstaging the disease in a subset of patients.1

The concept of conversion surgery for BTC is not entirely new, but its feasibility and impact have been amplified by these therapeutic advancements. The goal is to render a previously unresectable tumor resectable, thereby offering a chance at cure. This strategy demands a highly individualized approach, requiring careful patient selection and close collaboration within a multidisciplinary team. The decision to proceed with conversion surgery involves assessing the extent of tumor response to systemic therapy, the patient's overall performance status, and the technical feasibility of achieving an R0 resection. The authors emphasize that while a reduction in tumor burden makes it promising, the optimal timing and duration of neoadjuvant systemic therapy before attempting conversion surgery are still under investigation.1

For clinicians, this means a need to remain vigilant for patients who might benefit from this aggressive approach. The initial diagnosis of unresectable BTC no longer automatically precludes a curative intent. Instead, it necessitates a thorough evaluation of molecular markers and a consideration of whether a period of targeted or immunotherapy could open the door to surgery. This shift requires a deeper understanding of the specific molecular profiles of BTC, which can vary significantly between intrahepatic, extrahepatic, and gallbladder cancers. The heterogeneity of BTC means that a one-size-fits-all approach to conversion surgery is unlikely to succeed.1

Timing Autologous Stem Cell Transplantation in CNS Lymphoma

In a different oncological context, central nervous system (CNS) lymphoma presents its own set of challenges regarding treatment intensity and timing. Autologous stem cell transplantation (ASCT) has emerged as a critical component of treatment for many patients with CNS lymphoma, particularly those with relapsed or refractory disease, or as part of consolidation therapy in the upfront setting. The efficacy of ASCT in this population is well-established, offering improved survival outcomes compared to conventional chemotherapy alone. But the timing of ASCT relative to induction response is a crucial factor that influences its success, with the stake being patient survival.2

Higuchi, Tatetsu, and Hirano explored this relationship in their work published in the International Journal of Hematology.2 The abstract indicates that the timing of ASCT and the patient's response to induction therapy are intertwined. A robust response to initial induction chemotherapy is generally considered a prerequisite for successful ASCT, as it indicates a lower disease burden and a higher likelihood of achieving durable remission post-transplant. Patients who achieve a complete response (CR) or a very good partial response (VGPR) to induction therapy typically fare better with ASCT than those with lesser responses. This is because ASCT aims to consolidate the gains made during induction, eradicating any residual disease that might lead to relapse.2

The specific data on the optimal timing, however, remains a point of ongoing discussion. Is it better to proceed with ASCT as soon as a maximal response to induction is achieved, or is there a benefit to further cycles of chemotherapy? The study implies a correlation between induction response and transplant timing, suggesting that delaying ASCT in the face of a suboptimal induction response might be detrimental. Conversely, rushing to transplant before adequate disease control is achieved could also compromise outcomes. This delicate balance requires careful clinical judgment, often guided by imaging, cerebrospinal fluid analysis, and neurological assessment. For a deeper dive into the complexities of transplant timing in haematological malignancies, our previous coverage on myelofibrosis transplant timing offers additional context.

The Anaesthesia Conundrum in Arteriovenous Fistula Creation

While seemingly distinct, the choice of anaesthesia for arteriovenous fistula (AVF) creation, a procedure critical for hemodialysis access, also involves a decision-making process that balances patient factors, procedural outcomes, and resource considerations. The choice between local, regional, and general anaesthesia can impact surgical success rates, patient comfort, and the incidence of complications. Karas, Abrahams, and Khan addressed this in their paper in the Journal of Vascular Access, though their abstract focuses on biliary tract cancer, indicating a potential misattribution in the provided research.3 Assuming the intent was to discuss AVF creation, the principles of patient selection and procedural optimization still apply.

In AVF creation, the goal is to establish a durable, functional vascular access point for dialysis. The choice of anaesthesia can influence factors such as intraoperative blood flow, patient cooperation, and the risk of complications like hematoma or nerve injury. Local anaesthesia offers the benefit of avoiding systemic effects and allowing for immediate assessment of thrill and bruit, which are indicators of successful fistula formation. Regional anaesthesia, such as a brachial plexus block, provides more extensive pain control and can improve intraoperative conditions by promoting vasodilation, potentially enhancing fistula maturation. General anaesthesia, while offering complete patient immobility and comfort, carries higher systemic risks and can obscure immediate feedback on fistula patency. The decision often depends on patient comorbidities, anxiety levels, and the surgeon's preference and expertise. The authors' focus on biliary tract cancer in their abstract, however, means specific data on anaesthesia choice for AVF creation is not available from this source.3

The open-label design of many studies in these areas is an obvious caveat. Without blinding, both patients and clinicians may have biases that influence reported outcomes, particularly for subjective endpoints. The trials are often not powered to detect differences in specific subgroups, such as very elderly patients or those with multiple comorbidities, leaving a gap in evidence for these vulnerable populations. For instance, the optimal care for IgA nephritis in older transplant patients remains a data desert. The generalizability of findings from highly selected patient cohorts to broader clinical practice also warrants careful consideration. The rapid pace of therapeutic development means that guidelines often lag behind the latest evidence, requiring clinicians to synthesize new data with existing standards of care. This is particularly true in areas like advanced cancer, where new agents are continually redefining treatment algorithms. Clinicians seeking a comprehensive resource for oncology practice may find the Oxford Handbook of Oncology (4th ed) a valuable reference.

The ongoing challenge for clinicians is to integrate these evolving insights into daily practice. This means not only staying abreast of new drug approvals and surgical techniques but also understanding how these advancements alter the fundamental decision points in patient management. The shift towards personalized medicine, driven by molecular

profiling and a deeper understanding of disease biology, further complicates this trial pipeline. The era of one-size-fits-all treatment is rapidly receding, replaced by a need for highly individualized strategies that consider every facet of a patient's disease and personal circumstances. This requires a commitment to lifelong learning and a willingness to challenge established norms when new evidence emerges. The role of multidisciplinary teams becomes even more critical in this environment, ensuring that all relevant expertise is brought to bear on complex patient cases.

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

The most striking implication of this evolving landscape is the urgent need to redefine "unresectable" in biliary tract cancer. What was once a definitive diagnosis now demands a second look. Clinicians must actively screen patients for molecular markers and consider a course of targeted therapy or immunotherapy. This shift could open the door to conversion surgery, offering a chance at long-term disease management for a subset of patients previously considered beyond surgical intervention.

For industry, this signals a critical need for more robust clinical trials focusing on patient selection and optimal timing for conversion surgery. While the Okabayashi, Tabuchi, and Tokumaru paper highlights opportunities, the evidence base remains thin on precise criteria. Pharmaceutical companies developing new systemic therapies for BTC should collaborate with surgical teams to investigate combination approaches. This will help refine guidelines and ensure these innovative treatments reach the right patients at the right time.

Patients with newly diagnosed advanced BTC should be aware that their initial prognosis may no longer be the final word. They should discuss molecular testing and the potential for systemic therapy followed by surgery with their multidisciplinary team. This proactive approach empowers patients to explore all available avenues, moving beyond traditional palliative care to potentially more aggressive, disease-modifying strategies.

EDITORIAL & AI STANDARDS

AI tools are used to structure and summarise evidence from peer-reviewed primary sources. Articles that carry a signed Editor's take have been read in full by William Lopes. The others are not individually read by an editor, so check the cited source before relying on a figure.

REFERENCES

1. 1. Okabayashi T, Tabuchi M, Tokumaru T. Conversion surgery for advanced biliary tract cancer in the era of molecularly targeted therapy and immunotherapy: from unresectable disease to multidisciplinary curative strategy. Expert Rev Anticancer Ther. 2026;26(1):1-10. doi:10.1080/14737140.2026.42632073
2. 2. Higuchi Y, Tatetsu H, Hirano T. Timing of autologous stem cell transplantation and induction response in central nervous system lymphoma. Int J Hematol. 2026;123(1):1-8. doi:10.1007/s12185-026-04261-8
3. 3. Karas K, Abrahams B, Khan M. Comparison of local, regional and general anaesthesia on surgical outcomes in arteriovenous fistula creation. J Vasc Access. 2026;27(1):1-7. doi:10.1177/112972982642610515

LICENCE & RIGHTS

© 2026 The Life Science Feed. All rights reserved. This content is produced for medical education purposes. It may not be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted without prior written permission from The Life Science Feed.

MEDICAL DISCLAIMER

This content is intended for healthcare professionals only and does not constitute medical advice. Clinical decisions must be made by qualified practitioners based on individual patient circumstances.

FOLLOW THE LIFE SCIENCE FEED

Instagram @lifesciencefeed **LinkedIn** linkedin.com/company/thelifesciencefeed

thelifesciencefeed.com