

# Treating Advanced Pancreatic Cancer

## A Quick Guide

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This is a brief summary of 'Treating advanced pancreatic cancer' from our website. You will find more detailed information on there. In this information there are sections on

- About advanced pancreatic cancer
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- Pain control
- Questions for your doctor

You can view this information in a larger print on our website.

### About advanced pancreatic cancer

Advanced pancreatic cancer means the cancer has spread from where it started in the pancreas or has come back some time after you were first treated. In many people, pancreatic cancer can be quite advanced when it is first diagnosed and it is then not usually possible to cure it.

Even if the cancer is advanced, treatment is available to control your symptoms and help some people live longer. You may have chemotherapy, radiotherapy or surgery for advanced pancreatic cancer. You may also have pain control with pain killing drugs or nerve blocks. You may be able to take part in trials of experimental treatments for advanced pancreatic cancer.

### Deciding about treatment

It can be difficult to decide which treatment to try, or whether to have treatment at all when you have an advanced cancer. Your doctor will discuss the options with you. It can be helpful to talk over difficult decisions with someone outside your family and friends, such as your specialist nurse or a counsellor. There is information about counselling in the coping with cancer section of our website.

### Treatment to relieve the symptoms of a blocked bowel

It may be possible to use a drug called somatostatin (Octreotide) to help control symptoms of a blocked bowel instead of having an operation. Somatostatin is a hormone that is made naturally in the body. It can now be made artificially. It works by reducing the amount of fluid that builds up in your stomach and digestive system. This helps to stop you being sick and can relieve the bloating you feel.

Somatostatin is often used with steroids. These help to reduce swelling that is making the blockage worse. Unfortunately this type of treatment is only a temporary measure and the blockage will almost certainly return.

### Other drug treatment

People with advanced cancer are very likely to lose a lot of weight. Steroids may help to increase your appetite.

Let your doctor or nurse know if you have pain. They can make sure that you get the drugs that work best to control your particular type of pain.

Your doctors may suggest you have chemotherapy to try to shrink and control the cancer.

### **Radiotherapy**

Doctors do not often use radiotherapy for advanced pancreatic cancer. But in some people it may help to relieve symptoms by shrinking the cancer. There is a maximum total dose of radiotherapy you can have to any part of the body. So if you had radiotherapy to your abdomen when you were first treated, more radiotherapy to that area may not be an option for you.

You can have radiotherapy to another part of your body if your cancer has spread. The length of the course of treatment will vary, depending on the treatment you need and which part of the body is to be treated. But courses to relieve symptoms are usually fairly short.

Doctors may suggest a combination of chemotherapy and radiotherapy (chemoradiation) for locally advanced pancreatic cancer to try to shrink and slow your cancer down. Chemoradiation causes more side effects than having chemotherapy or radiotherapy by themselves, and so doctors are looking into ways of reducing these side effects. For a few people, chemoradiation may shrink the cancer enough to make surgery possible.

### **Stents to relieve symptoms**

Pancreatic cancer can sometimes block the bile duct or part of the small bowel (duodenum), which can cause symptoms such as jaundice and sickness. To help relieve these symptoms, your doctor may suggest putting a tube, called a stent, into your bile duct or duodenum to keep the blockage open. This is generally a simple procedure that can be done with either local anaesthetic or sedation.

There are not really very many side effects from having a stent. You may need to take antibiotics for a few days afterwards to prevent infection. Unfortunately, stents can become blocked after a few months. If necessary, your doctor can replace the stent.

If you are unable to have a stent, or the stent does not work for any reason, your doctor may suggest bypass surgery to relieve your symptoms. This is quite a major operation. You may want to talk this over fully with your doctor and nurse, and also with your close family and friends. No one can say how much you will benefit from the operation. But you may make a good recovery and feel better for longer if you have the surgery.

### **Pain control**

Although pain is common in pancreatic cancer, it can be kept under control in nearly all patients. If you are having any pain, the sooner you get help the better.

There are many different painkillers. Morphine based drugs are the most common type of painkillers used in cancer. Some painkillers are given as skin patches, liquid medicines or tablets. Sometimes they are given through a small tube put just under the skin.

Both chemotherapy and radiotherapy can help control pain by shrinking the tumour. If you have pain that is difficult to treat, your doctor may suggest a nerve block. This is a way of killing or numbing a nerve to stop it causing pain.

### Pancreatic cancer research

All treatments must be fully researched before they can be adopted as standard treatment for everyone. This is so that we can be sure they work better than the treatments we already use. And so we know they are safe.

First of all, treatments are developed and tested in laboratories. Only after we know that they are likely to be safe to test are they tested in people, in clinical trials. Cancer Research UK supports a lot of UK laboratory research into cancer and also supports many UK and international clinical trials.

Researchers are looking into

- Causes of pancreatic cancer
- Screening and diagnosis of pancreatic cancer
- Chemotherapy
- Radiotherapy and chemotherapy (chemoradiation)
- Biological therapies (including vaccines, monoclonal antibodies and growth factor blockers)
- Controlling symptoms

### What to ask your doctor about treating pancreatic cancer symptoms

- Is my cancer too advanced to be cured?
- How do you know?
- Can my cancer be controlled with treatment?
- What treatments are available?
- Will the treatment shrink the cancer, or slow it down?
- What are the side effects of the treatment?
- For how long will the treatment work?
- Are there any experimental treatments or trials I could try?
- Could you arrange for me to have a second opinion?
- What happens if I decide not to have the recommended treatment?
- Is there a counsellor here I could talk things through with?
- Will I be in pain?
- What can you offer to control pain?
- Is there a specialist nurse to help me with pain and other symptoms?
- Is there anyone who can give us financial advice?
- Are there any state benefits I can claim?

**For more information**, visit our website <http://www.cruk.org/about-cancer>

You will find a wide range of detailed, up to date information for people affected by cancer, including a clinical trials database that you can search for trials in the UK. Our information is based on the best current scientific evidence and reviewed regularly by leading clinicians and experts in health and social care.

For answers to your questions about cancer call our Cancer Information Nurses on 0808 800 4040 9am till 5pm Monday to Friday.

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