

About Pancreatic Cancer

A Quick Guide

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

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

About the pancreas

The pancreas is part of the digestive system. It is a large gland, about 6 inches (15 cm) long and shaped like a leaf. The wide end of the pancreas is called the head. The thin end is called the tail. The bit in the middle is called the body.

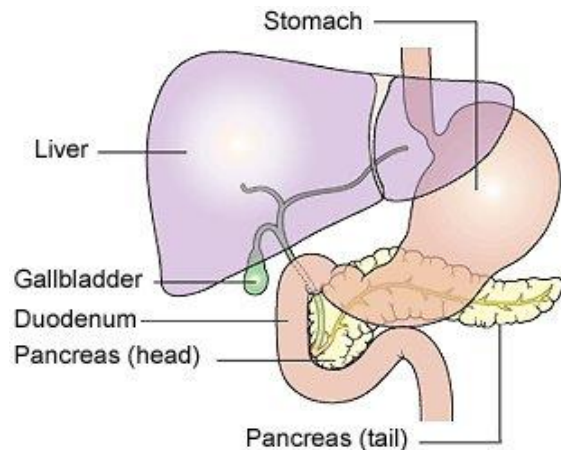


Diagram showing the position of the pancreas
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What does the pancreas do?

The pancreas has 2 important jobs in the body. The first is to produce the pancreatic digestive juices. The second is to produce insulin and other hormones to do with digestion. The part of the pancreas which produces the digestive juices is called the exocrine pancreas. The part of the pancreas which produces hormones, including insulin, is called the endocrine pancreas. The cancers that develop from these two different parts of the pancreas can behave differently and can cause different symptoms.

What happens if my pancreas is removed?

If you have your pancreas completely removed, you will have to take pancreatic enzyme supplements and insulin. Because you won't be making your own insulin, you will effectively have diabetes.

If you have part of your pancreas taken out, you will probably still make enough insulin. But your doctor will need to keep a very close eye on your blood sugar to make sure you do not develop diabetes.

Pancreatic cancer risks and causes

Pancreatic cancer is more common in older people. Almost half of all new cases are diagnosed in people aged 75 and over. It is uncommon in people under 40.

Smoking – This is known to increase your risk. Nearly 1 in 3 pancreatic cancers (30%) may be linked to smoking. Stopping smoking gradually reduces your risk to the same level as a non smoker.

Some medical conditions – Risk of pancreatic cancer is increased if you have a history of diabetes, long term inflammation of the pancreas (chronic pancreatitis), stomach ulcers, certain types of cancer or chronic hepatitis B infection. People with pancreatitis that runs in families (hereditary pancreatitis) also have an increased risk of pancreatic cancer.

Diet – Eating processed meats may increase your risk of pancreatic cancer. Studies show conflicting evidence on whether high levels of saturated fat in your diet can affect pancreatic cancer risk.

Body weight and exercise – Being overweight causes an increase in the risk of pancreatic cancer. Doing physical activity may protect against pancreatic cancer.

Family history – Although this is not usually a factor, sometimes pancreatic cancer can run in families. There may be a genetic link in up to 1 in 10 cases of pancreatic cancer (10%).

Screening for pancreatic cancer

Screening means testing people for the early stages of a disease before they have any symptoms. Before screening for any type of cancer can be carried out, doctors must have an accurate test to use. The test must be reliable in picking up cancers that are there. And it must not give false positive results in people who do not have cancer. At the moment there is no screening test reliable enough to use for pancreatic cancer in people at average risk.

Screening for people at high risk of pancreatic cancer

EUROPAC is an organisation involved in researching pancreatic cancer. They are running a screening programme for people who may be at high risk of developing it. For example if you have hereditary pancreatitis or a family history of pancreatic cancer. The researchers are trying to find the best combination of tests to use to give the best chance of picking up a cancer early. The tests include an endoluminal ultrasound, CT scan and blood tests. They are also looking at samples of pancreatic juice for genetic changes.

Pancreatic cancer symptoms

The most common types of cancer of the pancreas are exocrine tumours. The symptoms can be quite vague. And they vary depending on where the cancer is in your pancreas – in the head, body or tail. Some of the most common symptoms include pain in the stomach area or back, jaundice and weight loss.

About half of patients have jaundice when they first go to their doctor. Symptoms of jaundice can include yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes, severe itching, darkened urine, and pale coloured stools (bowel motions).

Other symptoms

There are other symptoms that you can have with cancer of the pancreas. These include diabetes, itching, sickness, change in bowel motions, fever and shivering, indigestion and blood clots.

There is an uncommon group of pancreatic tumours called endocrine pancreatic tumours or neuroendocrine tumours. About a third of these produce hormones. The symptoms are different for each type, depending on the hormone the tumour makes.

Types of pancreatic cancer

You can get cancer in the head, body or tail of the pancreas. About 75 out of 100 pancreatic cancers (75%) are in the head of the pancreas.

Exocrine cancers

The vast majority of cancers of the pancreas are exocrine in type. Most of these exocrine pancreatic cancers are ductal adenocarcinomas. These cancers start in the cells lining the ducts of the pancreas. The ducts are the tubes that carry the pancreatic digestive juices to the main pancreatic duct and the duodenum.

Rarer types of exocrine pancreatic cancer include cystic tumours and cancer of the acinar cells. The treatment for these types is similar to that for ductal adenocarcinoma.

Endocrine pancreatic tumours

These tumours are uncommon and are treated differently to exocrine tumours. Endocrine pancreatic tumours are also called neuroendocrine tumours. About a third of these produce hormones. They are named after the hormone they produce and include gastrinomas, insulinomas, somatostatinomas, VIPomas and glucagonomas. About two thirds of pancreatic neuroendocrine tumours do not produce hormones (called non functioning tumours).

Rare types of cancer of the pancreas

Very rare types of pancreatic cancer include pancreatoblastomas, sarcomas and lymphomas. They are treated differently to the main types of pancreatic cancer.

Should I see a pancreatic cancer specialist

It can be very difficult for GPs to decide who may have a suspected cancer and who has something much more minor. But there are particular symptoms that mean your GP should refer you to a specialist straight away. These are:

- Jaundice
- Pain in your upper abdomen (above your tummy button) for no apparent reason, combined with weight loss and maybe back pain
- A lump in your upper abdomen that your GP can feel

For an urgent referral, you should ideally get an appointment within 2 weeks. If you have jaundice, your doctor may arrange for you to have an ultrasound scan urgently.

Do bear in mind that these are not the only symptoms of pancreatic cancer. Symptoms such as feeling sick and loss of appetite are also common symptoms of other medical conditions. So it would not be sensible for your GP to refer you urgently without particular symptoms or combinations of symptoms.

If you are concerned that your GP is not taking your symptoms as seriously as you think they should, you could take this information along to an appointment.

What to ask your doctor about pancreatic cancer

- How will I know if I have pancreatic cancer?
- Am I more likely to get pancreatic cancer if I smoke or drink?
- I used to smoke. Does this mean I am more likely to get pancreatic cancer?
- Will changing my diet help to stop me getting pancreatic cancer?
- Can I be screened for pancreatic cancer?
- My father had pancreatic cancer. Does this mean I am more likely to get it?

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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