

Diagnosing Pancreatic Cancer

A Quick Guide

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This is a brief summary of 'Diagnosing 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.

Tests for pancreatic cancer

You usually begin by seeing your GP, who will examine you and ask about your general health. Your doctor will look at your skin and eyes and may ask you to have a blood test and give a urine sample to check for signs of jaundice (yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes). They will ask you to lie down for a physical examination. The doctor can tell whether your abdomen is tender. It may be possible to feel a lump. Or your liver may feel enlarged. Afterwards your doctor may refer you to hospital for tests or to see a specialist.

At the hospital

The specialist will ask about your medical history and symptoms. They will then examine you by feeling your abdomen. You may have blood tests and a chest X-ray to check your general health. Then your specialist will arrange some other tests for you. These may include an ultrasound, CT scan, MRI scan, ERCP, and laparoscopy. You may be asked to go into hospital to have your tests. Or you may have them in the outpatient department.

What will all the tests show?

These tests might show that you are likely to have cancer of the pancreas. You may have a cyst or lump on your pancreas that may or may not be cancer. Your doctor may be almost certain that you do have cancer of the pancreas. But the only way to be absolutely sure is to either remove the whole lump or remove a piece of tissue from the suspicious area to check under the microscope for cancer cells. This is called a biopsy.

Having a biopsy to test for pancreatic cancer

The only certain way to diagnose a cancer is by getting a sample of cells (biopsy) and looking at them under a microscope. The easiest way to do this is by putting a needle into the area of suspected cancer, and sucking out some cells. But specialists don't usually take biopsies this way if they think the cancer is removable with surgery.

If it is likely that your cancer can be removed, then your diagnosis will be made entirely by the doctor examining you and considering the results of your scans and tests. A confirmed diagnosis can be made when you have your surgery. If you have a cancer that is not removable with surgery, your specialist may want to biopsy it.

How to take a biopsy

There are several different ways your doctor can take a biopsy. Which one your doctor uses will depend on where the tumour is in the pancreas. One of the most common ways of taking a biopsy is during an endoscopic ultrasound. This is a test that uses an endoscope (flexible tube) and an ultrasound scanner to examine the digestive system. Other ways include during an endoscopic retrograde cholangio pancreatography (ERCP). This is a diagnostic test to look at the gallbladder and pancreas. A tube (endoscope) is passed through the mouth and down to the first part of the small bowel (the duodenum)). Or a laparoscopy (a small operation where a flexible tube filled with optical fibres (a laparoscope) is put inside the abdomen (tummy) through a small cut) or a laparotomy (an operation to look inside the abdomen (tummy)). Or your doctor may use ultrasound or a CT scan to guide a needle into the tumour through your skin.

Further tests for pancreatic cancer

If tests show you have pancreatic cancer, you may have further tests to see if the cancer has spread. These may include a liver ultrasound, CT scan of the abdomen, MRI scan, chest X-ray, endoscopic ultrasound (EUS), laparoscopy and laparoscopic ultrasound. The tests can show whether it is possible to completely remove your cancer or not.

You may already have had some or all of these tests when your doctor was diagnosing your cancer. You may be in hospital while you are having all your tests and your doctor may give you the diagnosis at the same time. Or you may have your tests as an outpatient and be asked to return to the hospital when your test results have come through.

You are likely to feel very anxious while you are waiting for results. It may help to talk to your specialist nurse or a close friend or relative about how you are feeling. Or you may want to contact a cancer support group to talk to someone who has been through a similar experience.

What to ask your doctor about pancreatic cancer

- What tests are you going to do?
- What are you looking for?
- Will the tests show whether I have cancer?
- Will the tests show whether my cancer can be operated on?
- Are any of the tests painful?
- Do any of the tests have after effects?
- Can I have these tests as an outpatient?
- Should I bring someone with me when I have the tests?
- How long will the results take?
- Who will give me the test results?

Notes

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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