

Pancreatic Cancer

What is pancreatic cancer?

The pancreas is an organ near your stomach that controls your blood sugar. Pancreatic cancer occurs when cells in the pancreas grow out of control. This kind of cancer usually spreads fast. Patients usually live less than one year, even if the cancer is caught early.

What increases the risk of getting it?

A history of pancreatitis (swelling of the pancreas), having a close family member with pancreatic cancer, certain rare genetic conditions, and tobacco and alcohol use all increase your chances of getting pancreatic cancer.

What are the symptoms?

You usually do not have symptoms until the cancer is already advanced. Symptoms of advanced cancer include losing weight without meaning to, stomach or back pain, yellowing of the skin and the whites of the eyes (called jaundice), loss of appetite, and depression.

Because these symptoms can also be caused by other diseases, you should see your doctor if you are worried. He or she may suggest other tests to figure out the cause of your symptoms.

How is it diagnosed?

Tests used to figure out if you have pancreatic cancer include computed tomography (CT) scans, ultrasounds, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), and biopsies. CT scans, ultrasounds, and MRIs take pictures of your pancreas. When you have a biopsy, a small sample of tissue from the pancreas is removed and looked at under a microscope.

How is it treated?

Treatment options include surgery, radiation therapy, and chemotherapy. You may be referred to a surgeon or a doctor who specializes in cancer or diseases of the digestive tract. Treatment depends on your age, health, treatment preferences, and the stage and location of the cancer. If surgery cannot fully remove the cancer, then treatment may focus on stopping the cancer from growing or spreading. If the cancer is advanced and treatments are not likely to help, then your doctor can make a plan to keep you as comfortable as possible.

How is it prevented?

There is no way to prevent pancreatic cancer. Things you can do that may reduce your risk include quitting smoking, staying at a healthy



Pancreatic Cancer *(continued)*

weight, not drinking too much alcohol, and eating a healthy diet.

Where can I get more information?

Your doctor

AAFP's Patient Education Resource
<http://familydoctor.org>

American Cancer Society
<http://www.cancer.org>
Telephone: 1-800-ACS-2345 (1-800-227-2345)
Call center that runs 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to answer questions about cancer and provide resources

CancerCare
<http://www.cancercare.org>
Telephone: 1-800-813-4673
E-mail: info@cancercare.org
Provides free counseling, education, financial assistance, and help from trained social workers

National Cancer Institute
<http://www.cancer.gov>
Telephone: 1-800-422-6237
Provides information about cancer, research, and statistics

Pancreatic Cancer Action Network
<http://www.pancan.org>
Telephone: 1-877-272-6226
Provides information about pancreatic cancer and clinical trials, tips from survivors, and caregiver support

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Notes:

This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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