



What is pancreatic cancer?

Pancreatic cancer occurs when abnormal cells within the pancreas grow in an uncontrolled way.

The pancreas is a small gland that sits behind the stomach.¹ It produces hormones, such as insulin, that control sugar levels in the blood.¹

The pancreas also produces enzymes that help the body digest food.¹

What are the different types of pancreatic cancer?

There are two different types of pancreatic cancer.¹

- ▶ **Exocrine tumours** develop in the cells in the pancreas that produce digestive enzymes. More than 90 per cent of all pancreatic cancers are exocrine tumours.¹
- ▶ **Pancreatic neuroendocrine tumours** (also called islet cell tumours) are rarer cancers that develop in the cells in the pancreas that produce hormones.¹

This fact sheet is about **pancreatic exocrine tumours**.

What are the symptoms of pancreatic cancer?

There are often no symptoms of pancreatic cancer in the early stages of the disease.

The most common symptoms of pancreatic cancer are:

- ▶ yellowing of the skin and the whites of the eyes – this is called jaundice¹
- ▶ pain in the upper or middle back or abdomen¹
- ▶ unexplained weight loss¹
- ▶ loss of appetite¹
- ▶ unusual tiredness.¹

There are a number of conditions that may cause these symptoms, not just pancreatic cancer. If any of these symptoms are experienced, it is important that they are discussed with a doctor.

What are the risk factors for pancreatic cancer?

A risk factor is any factor that is associated with an increased chance of developing a particular health condition, such as pancreatic cancer. There are different types of risk factors, some of which can be modified and some which cannot.

It should be noted that having one or more risk factors does not mean a person will develop pancreatic cancer. Many people have at least one risk factor but will never develop pancreatic cancer, while others with pancreatic cancer may have had no known risk factors. Even if a person with pancreatic cancer has a risk factor, it is usually hard to know how much that risk factor contributed to the development of their disease.



While the causes of pancreatic cancer are not fully understood, there are a number of factors associated with the risk of developing the disease. These factors include:

- ▶ tobacco smoking¹
- ▶ chronic inflammation of the pancreas – called pancreatitis¹
- ▶ certain inherited genetic conditions such as hereditary pancreatitis syndrome, Lynch Syndrome, hereditary atypical multiple mole melanoma syndrome, hereditary BRCA2-related breast and ovarian cancer and Peutz-Jeghers syndrome³
- ▶ long-term diabetes (Type 2).¹

How is pancreatic cancer diagnosed?

A number of tests will be performed to investigate symptoms of pancreatic cancer and confirm a diagnosis. Some of the more common tests include:

- ▶ a physical examination¹
- ▶ imaging of the abdomen , which may include X-ray, computed tomography (CT) scan,^{1,2}endoscopic ultrasound (for small tumours)³ or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)¹
- ▶ an internal examination of the organs inside the abdomen using endoscopy or laparoscopy¹
- ▶ taking a sample of tissue (biopsy) from the pancreas for examination under a microscope.¹

Treatment options

Treatment and care of people with cancer is usually provided by a team of health professionals – called a multidisciplinary team.

Treatment for pancreatic cancer depends on the stage of the disease, the severity of symptoms and the person's general health. Treatment options can include surgery to remove part or all of the pancreas and nearby organs that may be affected, radiotherapy and/or chemotherapy, and targeted therapies to destroy cancer cells.^{1,2}

Research is ongoing to find new ways to diagnose and treat different types of cancer. Some people may be offered the option of participation in a clinical trial to test new ways of treating pancreatic cancer.

Finding support

People often feel overwhelmed, scared, anxious and upset after a diagnosis of cancer. These are all normal feelings.

Having practical and emotional support during and after diagnosis and treatment for cancer is very important. Support may be available from family and friends, health professionals or special support services.

In addition, State and Territory Cancer Councils provide general information about cancer as well as information on local resources and relevant support groups. The Cancer Council Helpline can be accessed from anywhere in Australia by calling **13 11 20** for the cost of a local call.

More information about finding support can be found on the Cancer Australia website www.canceraustralia.gov.au

References

1. National Cancer Institute. Pancreatic cancer treatment (PDQ) – patient version. Available from <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/pdq/treatment/pancreatic/Patient>. [Accessed July 2012].
2. Thomson B. Pancreatic cancer: current management. *Australian Family Physician* 2006; 34(4): 212–216.
3. Pancreatic cancer: ESMO Clinical Practice Guidelines for diagnosis, treatment and follow-up *Annals of Oncology* 2010.

