



# PANCREATIC CANCER

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The pancreas is an organ that is about 6 inches long. It's located deep in your belly between your stomach and backbone. Your liver, intestine, and other organs surround your pancreas.

The widest part of the pancreas is called the head.

The head of the pancreas is closest to the small intestine. The middle section is called the body, and the thinnest part is called the tail. The pancreas makes pancreatic juices. These juices contain enzymes that help break down food. The juices flow through a system of ducts leading to the main pancreatic duct. The pancreatic juices flow through the main duct to the duodenum, the first part of the small intestine. The pancreas is also a gland that makes insulin and other hormones. These hormones enter the bloodstream and travel throughout the body. They help the body use or store the energy that comes from food. For example, insulin helps control the amount of sugar in the blood.

Pancreatic cancer can invade other tissues, shed cancer cells into the abdomen, or spread to other organs:

- **Invade:** A malignant pancreatic tumor can grow and invade organs next to the pancreas, such as the stomach or small intestine.
- **Shed:** Cancer cells can shed (break off) from the main pancreatic tumor. Shedding into the abdomen may lead to new tumors forming on the surface of nearby organs and tissues. The doctor may call these seeds or implants. The seeds can cause an abnormal buildup of fluid in the abdomen (ascites).
- **Spread:** Cancer cells can spread by breaking away from the original tumor. They can spread through the blood vessels to the liver and lungs. In addition, pancreatic cancer cells can spread through lymph vessels to nearby lymph nodes. After spreading, the cancer

cells may attach to other tissues and grow to form new tumors that may damage those tissues..

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## RISK FACTORS

Studies have found the following risk factors for cancer of the pancreas:

- **Smoking:** Smoking tobacco is the most important risk factor for pancreatic cancer. People who smoke tobacco are more likely than nonsmokers to develop this disease. Heavy smokers are most at risk.
- **Diabetes:** People with diabetes are more likely than other people to develop pancreatic cancer.
- **Family history:** Having a mother, father, sister, or brother with pancreatic cancer increases the risk of developing the disease.
- **Inflammation of the pancreas:** Pancreatitis is a painful inflammation of the pancreas. Having pancreatitis for a long time may increase the risk of pancreatic cancer.
- **Obesity:** People who are overweight or obese are slightly more likely than other people to develop pancreatic cancer.

Many other possible risk factors are under active study. For example, researchers are studying whether a diet high in fat (especially animal fat) or



heavy drinking of alcoholic beverages may increase the risk of pancreatic cancer. Another area of active research is whether certain genes increase the risk of disease.

Many people who get pancreatic cancer have none of these risk factors, and many people who have known risk factors don't develop the disease.

#### SYMPTOMS

Early cancer of the pancreas often doesn't cause symptoms. When the cancer grows larger, you may notice one or more of these common symptoms:

- Dark urine, pale stools, and yellow skin and eyes from jaundice
- Pain in the upper part of your belly
- Pain in the middle part of your back that doesn't go away when you shift your position
- Nausea and vomiting
- Stools that float in the toilet

Also, advanced cancer may cause these general symptoms:

- Weakness or feeling very tired
- Loss of appetite or feelings of fullness
- Weight loss for no known reason.

These symptoms may be caused by pancreatic cancer or by other health problems. People with these symptoms should tell their doctor so that problems can be diagnosed and treated as early as possible.

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