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If You Have Pancreatic Cancer

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What is pancreatic cancer?

Pancreatic cancer is a type of cancer that starts in the pancreas. It happens when **exocrine cells** (a type of cell found in the pancreas) start to change and grow out of control, crowding out normal cells.

Your pancreas has 2 jobs:

- It makes a substance that helps break down (digest) the food you eat.
it makes hormones that help control the levels of sugar, insulin, and other
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Ask your doctor to use this picture to show you where your cancer is located.

Pancreatic cancer can spread to other parts of the body. When cancer does this, it's called *metastasis*. The type of cancer is based on the type of cells it started from. So even if a pancreatic cancer spreads to your liver, for example, it is still called pancreatic cancer, not liver cancer.

Questions to ask the doctor

- Would you please write down the kind of cancer you think I might have?
- Has it spread outside my pancreas?
- What will happen next?

How does the doctor know I have pancreatic cancer?

The doctor will ask questions about your health and do a physical exam. Most of the time, early pancreatic cancers don't cause any [signs or symptoms](#)². They are often not found until they cause problems that make a person seek help from a doctor. Tests that may be done

If signs are pointing to pancreatic cancer, more tests will be done. Here are some of the [tests you may need](#)³:

Biopsy: The doctor takes out a little bit of tissue or some cells to check for cancer. A biopsy is the only way to tell for sure if you have cancer. There are different ways to do biopsies, so ask your doctor which type of biopsy you will have.

CT scan: This test uses x-rays to make pictures of your insides. This can show clear pictures of the pancreas and the area around it to see if the cancer has spread.

MRI scan: This test uses radio waves and strong magnets instead of x-rays to make clear pictures of the inside of the body. This test may be used to learn more about the cancer's size and spread. Special types of MRI scans can also be used to look at ducts and blood vessels in and around the pancreas.

Endoscopic ultrasound (EUS): This test uses sound waves to make pictures of the inside of the body. A small ultrasound on the tip of a thin tube is passed down the throat, into the stomach, and then into the first part of the small intestine. The ultrasound can be pointed to look at the pancreas. It can also be used to take out a little bit of tissue that can be checked for cancer.

Endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography (ERCP): A small camera on the tip of a thin tube is passed down the throat, into the stomach, and into the first part of the small intestine. This test can check if the ducts are blocked due to pancreatic cancer. It can also be used to help open a blocked duct, insert a stent to keep the duct open, or take out some cells.

Liver function tests: These are blood tests to see how well the liver is working.

Tumor markers: Some pancreatic cancer cells can make certain proteins (such as CA 19-9) that show up in the blood. This test can be used along with other tests to help your doctor find out the kind of pancreatic cancer that you have.

Other blood tests: You might have other tests to help find out if you have any other health problems, such as kidney disease and bone marrow problems.

Questions to ask the doctor

advanced and harder to treat, treatment can often make symptoms better and slow down the cancer's growth. Talk with your doctor to find out your options.

The treatment plan that's best for you will depend on:

- The stage and grade of the cancer
- Your age

freezing the tumor, or killing the tumor by blocking the blood supply that feeds the metastasis. Talk to your doctor about what to expect.

Chemo

Immunotherapy

[Immunotherapy](#)⁹ is treatment that either boosts your own immune system or uses man-made versions of parts of the immune system that attack the pancreatic cancer cells. One type of immunotherapy that is used to treat pancreatic cancer is given into a vein. This drug may cause you to develop diarrhea, problems breathing, rashes, or inflammation of the liver or thyroid. Most of these problems go away after treatment ends. If you have side effects, talk to your cancer care team so they can help.

Radiation therapy

[Radiation](#)¹⁰ uses high energy x-rays to kill cancer cells. Radiation (along with chemotherapy) can also be used to shrink the tumor so that it can be taken out by surgery. It can also be used to help make symptoms better in later stages— such as pain caused by an advanced cancer.

Side effects of radiation treatments

If your doctor suggests radiation, ask about what side effects might happen. The most common side effects of radiation are:

- Skin changes where the radiation is given
- Feeling very tired
- Feeling sick to your stomach
- Losing weight

Pain medicines

[Pain](#)¹¹ is a common problem with pancreatic cancer. You should not be afraid to use the pain medicines offered. Pain medicines work best when they are taken at set times, not just when the pain gets bad. Ask your doctor which ones you will get and what to expect.

Clinical trials

Clinical trials are research studies that test new drugs or other treatments in people. They compare standard treatments with others that may be better.

Clinical trials are one way to get the newest cancer treatment. They are the best way for

doctors to find better ways to treat cancer. If your doctor can find one that's studying the kind of cancer you have, it's up to you whether to take part. And if you do sign up for a clinical trial, you can always stop at any time.

If you would like to learn more about clinical trials that might be right for you, start by asking your doctor if your clinic or hospital conducts clinical trials. See [Clinical Trials](#)¹² to learn more.

What about other treatments that I hear about?

[trials.html](#)

13. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/treatment-types/complementary-and-integrative-medicine.html
14. www.cancer.org

Words to know

Adenocarcinoma (AD-no-KAR-suh-**NO**-muh): Cancer that starts in the glandular cells that line certain organs and make and release substances into the body, such as mucus, digestive juices, or other fluids.

Angiography (AN-jee-**AH**-gruh-fee): This is an x-ray test that looks at blood vessels. A small amount of dye is injected into an artery to outline the blood vessels, and then x-rays are taken. This test can be useful in finding out if a pancreatic cancer has grown through the walls of certain blood vessels.

Endocrine cells (EN-doh-krin): Cells in the pancreas that produce hormones (such as insulin) that help control sugar in the blood.

Exocrine cells (EK-soh-krin): Cells in the pancreas that make special juices that help your body digest food after you eat.

Pancreatic Enzymes: The proteins made by the pancreas that help in the digestion of food. Together these enzymes are commonly referred to as pancreatic juice.

Targeted therapy: These drugs affect mainly cancer cells and not normal cells in the body. These drugs often have milder side effects than chemo.

How can I learn more?

We have a lot more information for you. You can find it online at www.cancer.org¹⁴. Or, you can call our toll-free number at 1-800-227-2345 to talk to one of our cancer information specialists.

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