

★ **Recommended reading:** [Pancreatic Cancer Treatment \(PDQ®\): Patient Version](#)

Expert-reviewed information summary about the treatment of pancreatic cancer.

A.D.A.M. Medical Encyclopedia.

## Pancreatic carcinoma

### Pancreatic cancer; Cancer - pancreas

Last reviewed: August 24, 2011.

Pancreatic carcinoma is cancer of the pancreas.

### Causes, incidence, and risk factors

The pancreas is a large organ located behind the stomach. It makes and releases enzymes into the intestines that help the body absorb foods, especially fats.

Hormones called insulin and glucagon, which help your body control blood sugar levels, are made in special cells in the pancreas called islet cells. Tumors can also occur in these cells, but they are called islet cell tumors.

The exact cause of pancreatic cancer is unknown. It is more common in:

- People with diabetes
- People with long-term inflammation of the pancreas ([chronic pancreatitis](#))
- Smokers

Pancreatic cancer is slightly more common in women than in men. The risk increases with age.

A small number of cases are related to genetic syndromes that are passed down through families.

### Symptoms

A tumor or cancer in the pancreas may grow without any symptoms at first. This means pancreatic cancer is often advanced when it is first found.

Early symptoms of pancreatic cancer include:

- Dark urine and clay-colored stools
- [Fatigue](#) and weakness
- [Jaundice](#) (a yellow color in the skin, mucous membranes, or eyes)
- Loss of appetite and weight loss
- Nausea and vomiting

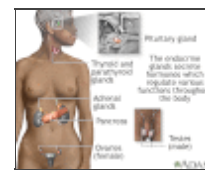
### What works?



**Carcinoma of Unknown Primary Treatment (PDQ®): Patient Version**  
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### Figures



### In the news...



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19 December 2012  
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### Presentation

[Biliary obstruction - series](#)

### Read More

Pain or discomfort in the upper part of the belly or abdomen

Other possible symptoms are:

- Back pain
- [Blood clots](#)
- Diarrhea
- Indigestion

## Signs and tests

- [CT scan of the abdomen](#)
- Endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography (ERCP)
- [Endoscopic](#) ultrasound
- [MRI of the abdomen](#)
- [Pancreatic biopsy](#)

This disease may also affect the results of the following tests:

- Complete blood count ([CBC](#))
- [Liver function tests](#)
- [Serum bilirubin](#)

## Treatment

Because pancreatic cancer is often advanced when it is first found, very few pancreatic tumors can be removed by surgery. The standard surgical procedure is called a pancreaticoduodenectomy (Whipple procedure).

This surgery should be done at centers that perform the procedure often. Some studies suggest that surgery is best performed at hospitals that do more than five of these surgeries per year.

When the tumor has not spread out of the pancreas but cannot be removed, [radiation therapy](#) and [chemotherapy](#) together may be recommended.

When the tumor has spread (metastasized) to other organs such as the liver, chemotherapy alone is usually used. The standard chemotherapy drug is gemcitabine, but other drugs may be used. Gemcitabine can help about 25% of patients.

Patients whose tumor cannot be totally removed, but who have a blockage of the tubes that transport bile ([biliary obstruction](#)) must have that blockage relieved. There are two approaches:

- Surgery
- Placement of a tiny metal tube (biliary stent) during ERCP

Managing pain and other symptoms is an important part of treating advanced pancreatic cancer. Palliative care teams and hospice can help with pain and symptom management, and provide psychological support for patients and their families during the illness.

## Support Groups

You can ease the stress of illness by joining a [support group](#) with members who share common experiences and problems (see [cancer - support group](#)).

## Expectations (prognosis)

Malignancy



Pancreatic Cancer

MedlinePlus.gov links to free, reliable, up-to-date health information from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and other trusted health organizations.

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Some patients with pancreatic cancer that can be surgically removed are cured. However, in more than 80% of patients the tumor has already spread and cannot be completely removed at the time of diagnosis.

Chemotherapy and radiation are often given after surgery to increase the cure rate (this is called adjuvant therapy). For pancreatic cancer that cannot be removed completely with surgery, or cancer that has spread beyond the pancreas, a cure is not possible and the average survival is usually less than 1 year. Such patients should consider enrolling in a clinical trial (a medical research study to determine the best treatment).

Ninety-five percent of the people diagnosed with this cancer will not be alive 5 years later.

## Complications

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- Blood clots
- Depression
- Infections
- Liver problems
- Pain
- Weight loss

## Calling your health care provider

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Call for an appointment with your health care provider if you have:

- Abdominal pain that does not go away
- Back pain
- Loss of appetite
- Unexplained fatigue or weight loss
- Other symptoms of this disorder

## Prevention

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- If you smoke, stop smoking.
- Eat a diet high in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.
- Exercise regularly.

## References

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1. National Cancer Institute. *Pancreatic Cancer Treatment PDQ*. Updated August 13, 2010.
2. National Comprehensive Cancer Network. *Clinical Practice Guidelines in Oncology: Pancreatic Adenocarcinoma*. Version 2.2011.
3. Tempero M, Brand R. Pancreatic cancer. In: Goldman L, Ausiello D, eds. *Cecil Medicine*. 24th ed. Philadelphia, PA: Saunders Elsevier; 2011:chap 200.

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