



Your guide to
Pancreatic cancer



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Pancreatic cancer

The pancreas is a secretory organ (gland) in the abdomen which produces hormones like insulin and digestive juices. It sits between the liver and the stomach in a central position under the bottom of the ribcage. There are 3 parts to the pancreas, the head, the body and the tail. The head is the wide section which joins the pancreas to the duodenum, the first part of the small intestine, via the pancreatic duct which carries the pancreatic products. Pancreatic cancer can start anywhere in the organ, but the most common type is exocrine pancreatic cancer which starts in the cells that make digestive juices.

Each year in the UK around 10,800 people are diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, making it the 10th most common cancer.

[What is pancreatic cancer? | Cancer Research UK](#) 

Risk factors

Certain things, some of which can be changed and others which cannot, can increase the risk of developing pancreatic cancer. Having one or more of these risk factors does not guarantee a diagnosis of pancreatic cancer and some people who are diagnosed do not have any known risk factors.

- ✓ **Age** – people aged 65 and over are more likely to develop pancreatic cancer. It is less common in those under 40.
- ✓ **Lifestyle factors** – smoking, smokeless tobacco, alcohol, being overweight or obese and some dietary factors can increase the risk of developing pancreatic cancer.
- ✓ **Family history and genetics** – around 10% of pancreatic cancers may be linked to inherited faulty genes but most people diagnosed have no history of pancreatic cancer in their family. The risk of developing pancreatic cancer may be higher for people who have two or more close relatives (parents, siblings or children) with pancreatic cancer.
- ✓ **Medical conditions** – there is some evidence of links between pancreatic cancer and some infections and diabetes, but it is not clear exactly how they are linked and most people with diabetes or infections will not develop pancreatic cancer. Chronic pancreatitis, a condition where the pancreas is swollen and inflamed for a long period of time, increases the risk of pancreatic cancer.

[More information about causes and risk factors of pancreatic cancer | Macmillan Cancer Support](#) 





Symptoms

Pancreatic cancer may not have easily recognisable symptoms initially or any symptoms at all but the following may be present.

- ✓ Jaundice (yellowing) of the whites of the eyes or skin
- ✓ Itchy skin
- ✓ Darker urine (pee) and stool (poo)
- ✓ Loss of appetite or unintentional weight loss
- ✓ Tiredness and lack of energy
- ✓ Fevers (temperatures) or feeling hot and sweaty
- ✓ Nausea or vomiting (feeling sick or being sick)
- ✓ Constipation, diarrhoea or other bowel changes
- ✓ Indigestion and bloating
- ✓ Upper abdominal (tummy) pain and back pain which worsens when eating or lying down and improves when leaning forward

If you have any of these, you should see your GP. They can be caused by conditions other than pancreatic cancer, but it is important to get them checked as soon as possible.

More information about the symptoms of pancreatic cancer | NHS



Diagnosis

If you visit your GP with symptoms concerning for pancreatic cancer, they will ask you about your general health and lifestyle as well as any symptoms. They may examine you, do blood tests and ask you to provide a urine sample. An ultrasound scan or CT scan may also be arranged by the GP and carried out at a local hospital.

The GP may make a referral to a specialist if they are concerned about anything they have found on questioning, physical examination or in the tests carried out. The specialist will ask questions like the GP then they may carry out more investigations including:

- ✓ **Scans** – including a CT, PET-CT scan or MRI which take lots of pictures and put them together to form a 3D image of the pancreas and other organs.
- ✓ **Ultrasound** – sound waves are used to create a picture of the inside of the body. The ultrasound probe can be used either externally over the abdomen or internally via an endoscope passed down the oesophagus (food pipe).
- ✓ **Biopsy** – a small sample of cells is taken from any areas of suspicion to be tested for cancer. The sample may also be tested for tumour markers, gene, DNA and protein changes.
- ✓ **Cholangiopancreatography scans** – special scans to produce detailed images of the pancreas.

[More information about testing for pancreatic cancer | Cancer Research UK](#)



Treatment

Which treatments are offered depends on the stage and grade of the cancer when it is diagnosed (how big and how advanced), the position within the pancreas and your general health and preferences. Treatment may be offered with the intention of curing the cancer, slowing the growth or managing symptoms. Pancreatic cancer can be difficult to treat as it is often diagnosed at a later stage when it has grown larger and may have spread either within the area next to it or to other parts of the body.

Treatments may be used alone, in combination or one after the other. The main treatments for pancreatic cancer are:

- ✓ **Surgery** – to remove cancer which has not spread outside the pancreas and is not affecting any major blood vessels. Surgical procedures may also be used to relieve symptoms caused by the tumour blocking the drainage ducts for the pancreas or gallbladder.
- ✓ **Chemotherapy** – drugs which are toxic to cells are used to kill the cancer or shrink the tumour to make it possible to remove surgically.
- ✓ **Radiotherapy** – targeted radiation is used to kill the cancer or slow the growth and control symptoms.
- ✓ **Symptom management (best supportive care)** – medications to manage pain, help with digestion, blood sugar control, nausea, etc.

[More information about treatment for pancreatic cancer | Pancreatic Cancer UK](#)



Living with pancreatic cancer

Follow up

Whether you have finished treatment or are having best supportive care, you will have follow ups either at the hospital, with a GP or a combination of both. Follow ups may involve scans or blood tests and a discussion about any symptoms and how well they are controlled. It is important not to wait for a follow up appointment if any new symptoms develop or usual ones worsen significantly.

Diet

Many people with pancreatic cancer lose weight as they are not able to absorb the nutrients from food as usual. The enzymes made in the pancreas also help the body break down protein and fat so damage to the pancreas, either from cancer or treatment, can lead to diarrhoea and floating stools which are pale and smell offensive. Enzyme supplements taken as tablets with meals and snacks can help to replace some of the lost enzymes and alleviate symptoms.

[Click here for more about Pancreatic Enzyme Replacement Therapy \(PERT\) | Pancreatic Cancer UK](#) 

Blood sugar control

The pancreas produces insulin which controls the amount of glucose (sugar) in the blood. Damage to the pancreas as a result of cancer or treatment, or the removal of part or all of the pancreas surgically can prevent the body being able to produce as much insulin as needed for good blood glucose control. This can result in a type of diabetes called type 3c, which requires medication in the form of either tablets or insulin injections to control the glucose levels.

[More information about type 3c diabetes? | Diabetes UK](#) 



Work and finances

Most people will need to take some time off work during cancer treatment either to recover from procedures or manage side effects. While it is not a requirement to tell employers about a cancer diagnosis, it can often help them to offer appropriate support both during time off and on return to work.

Macmillan offer advice for employees and employers about working with cancer:

[How to discuss your cancer diagnosis with your employer | Macmillan Cancer Support](#) 

[Macmillan at Work | Macmillan Cancer Support](#) 

Apart from needing to take time off work, cancer can have a financial impact in other ways, for example, costs of travelling to appointments, needing a warmer house during treatment, etc. Some people on low incomes may be eligible for benefits payments or help with health costs. Hospital cancer units often have access to benefits advisors who can help or may be able to signpost to other organisations, such as [Maggie's Centres](#) or [Citizen's Advice](#).

It may be possible to claim a one-off, small grant from some charities either for a particular expenditure or for general help. Macmillan have information about grants and loans, including their own Macmillan grants, on their website [Grants and loans for people with cancer](#).

People who have been diagnosed with cancer are entitled to free NHS prescriptions. GPs or hospitals can provide the forms required to apply for a prescription cost exemption certificate and once an application has been made, pharmacists can supply forms to reclaim costs incurred for prescriptions issued while waiting for the certificate.

[Help with NHS prescription costs](#) 

Emotional support

A cancer diagnosis can turn the world upside down whether it's you or someone close to you who has received it. Many people hear the word cancer then don't take in anything else that is said during the appointment.

At first, the appointments for tests, scans, consultant discussions and treatment coming one after the other can feel like being carried along by a current with no time to think about or process what is happening.

Lots of resources are often provided in a short time to direct people to organisations that can help or trusted sources of information, but it can be overwhelming and easy to forget what has and has not been said or provided.

Many employers have employee assistance programmes (EAPs) such as the one provided by Zurich, which can offer counselling and advice. Some people find speaking to someone who has been through a similar experience to them helpful, while others prefer to speak to a healthcare professional. There is support out there in many different forms, but it's important to use reliable organisations.

NHS recommended resources

Support for you
[Pancreatic Cancer UK](#)

Emotional, financial and physical help for people with cancer
[Macmillan Cancer Support](#)

