

Patient information from BMJ

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Chronic pancreatitis

Chronic pancreatitis happens when the pancreas becomes damaged over time by inflammation (swelling), which causes pain and other symptoms. It is often linked to years of drinking too much alcohol. There is no cure, but treatment can help slow down the damage.

You can use our information to talk with your doctor about what treatments are right for you.

What is chronic pancreatitis?

Your pancreas lies just behind your stomach. It's a gland that helps you break down food to use as energy.

Inflammation can damage the pancreas so that it doesn't work as well as it should. This inflammation is called pancreatitis. Pancreatitis can either be:

- acute - this means it comes on suddenly, or
- chronic - this means it happens gradually over years and doesn't go away.

This leaflet deals with chronic pancreatitis.

People with this condition tend not to live as long as they might otherwise have. It is usually linked to years of heavy drinking. But other things that can make the condition more likely include:

- smoking
- having a condition called coeliac disease
- your genes - pancreatitis can be hereditary (inherited)
- eating a high-fat, high-protein diet.

But some people get the condition for no obvious reason. This is called 'idiopathic' chronic pancreatitis.

Pancreatitis that's linked to drinking alcohol happens in adults. But hereditary chronic pancreatitis can happen in children, usually in late childhood and the early teenage years.

Chronic pancreatitis

Another type of pancreatitis, called juvenile idiopathic chronic pancreatitis, can happen to young people, usually when they are aged between about 19 and 23. Idiopathic pancreatitis can also develop in late middle age.

What are the symptoms?

The main symptom of chronic pancreatitis is a dull abdominal (tummy) pain that spreads to the back. It seems to get better when people sit and lean forwards, and it gets worse about half an hour after eating.

There are other symptoms, but they don't happen to everyone. They include:

- jaundice (yellowing of the skin)
- having a lot of fat in your stools. They might be foul smelling and hard to flush. This is called steatorrhoea
- malnutrition. This happens partly because people are afraid to eat because it makes the pain worse. Malnutrition can lead to other symptoms, such as tiredness and weight loss
- nausea and vomiting
- shortness of breath.

If your doctor thinks you might have chronic pancreatitis, he or she might do some tests. These might include blood tests, and scans, such as x-rays and ultrasound.

These scans can help to show up small lumps or stones in the pancreas, called calcifications. These are build-ups of calcium that happen with chronic pancreatitis.

What treatments work?

There is no cure for chronic pancreatitis. But treatments can:

- reduce pain and other symptoms
- stop you from losing too much weight
- help you get the right nutrition
- help with diabetes and other complications
- ensure that you get screened for pancreatic cancer if needed. Some people with pancreatitis have an increased chance of pancreatic cancer
- help maintain or improve your quality of life.

Treatments include changes to your lifestyle, pain relief, medicines to help you get nutrition from your food, and, in some cases, surgery.

Lifestyle changes

If you smoke, drink alcohol, or both, your doctor will strongly advise you to stop. Stopping doing these things will not reverse the damage to your pancreas, but it can stop it getting worse.

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It's a good idea to stop drinking alcohol even if it was not the cause of your pancreatitis. This is because drinking alcohol can cause pain in people with chronic pancreatitis, whatever the cause.

Pain relief

You might be able to control your pain using simple painkillers such as paracetamol or ibuprofen. But if these don't help your doctor might prescribe stronger painkillers. Always follow your doctor's advice carefully when taking these medicines.

You might also be offered a low-dose antidepressant medicine. These drugs are usually used to treat conditions such as depression and anxiety. But in some people they can help with pain. You can discuss with your doctor what medicines are right for you.

Nutrition

Your doctor will probably recommend that you eat quite a high-calorie diet. This is because your body needs more energy if you have pancreatitis. You will probably be advised to eat small, regular meals, in a 'little and often' way.

To help you get nutrition from your food without too much pain, your doctor will probably prescribe treatments called pancreatic enzymes. These are medicines that help your pancreas process the food you eat.

Your doctor might recommend a low-fat diet, but only if you are in extreme pain. This is because fat is important in helping us absorb vitamins. Low-fat diets are usually only recommended for people who are being treated in hospital for severe symptoms.

Surgery

Most people with chronic pancreatitis don't need surgery. But you might need an operation if:

- a build-up of calcium (calcification) has caused a pancreatic duct to become blocked, or
- you have a pancreatic cyst that needs to be drained. Cysts are sacs of fluid that can form on the surface of the pancreas. They often go away by themselves. But if they cause symptoms, such as pain, they might need to be drained.

If you have diabetes

Treatment for people with pancreatitis who also have diabetes is largely the same as for other people. But you will need to take insulin.

Your doctor will want to keep a close eye on your treatment. This is because people who need to take insulin and who have pancreatitis have a greater chance of hypoglycaemia (having a 'hypo').

What will happen?

With treatment, the pain of pancreatitis usually decreases over time, although this can take several years. If you have pain that doesn't get better, tell your doctor.

Chronic pancreatitis

People with chronic pancreatitis tend to die younger than would be expected if they didn't have the condition, especially those with juvenile or hereditary pancreatitis. Your doctor will talk with you about how pancreatitis affects life expectancy.

Whatever type of the condition you have, you will probably need to take your pancreatic enzyme medicine for life.

Having pancreatitis can sometimes lead to other conditions, such as diabetes, pancreatic cancer, and an increased chance of fractures. Your doctor might recommend that you have regular screening for pancreatic cancer, especially if your pancreatitis is inherited.

The pain and stress of pancreatitis can be difficult to deal with emotionally. Getting support can help, as can talking to other people with the condition.

For example, in the UK, the Pancreatitis Supporters Network (pancreatitis.org.uk) offers information, advice, and a chance to meet others with the condition.

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