

Patient information from BMJ

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Pancreatic cancer

Pancreatic cancer is a serious illness. If you've been told you have this cancer, you'll probably feel anxious about what lies ahead.

If the cancer is diagnosed at an early stage, surgery to remove the cancer can help you live longer. If your cancer is more advanced, this type of cancer is much harder to treat.

What is pancreatic cancer?

Your pancreas lies just behind your stomach. It's a gland that helps you break down the food you eat. It also helps you use the energy you get from food.

Usually, cells in your body grow and die in an orderly way. But if you have pancreatic cancer, some of the cells start to grow out of control. They form a lump called a **tumour**.

Cells from the tumour can break off, travel around your body, and cause cancers in other locations (called **metastases**).

We don't know why some people get pancreatic cancer and others don't. But it is more common in older people, people who smoke, and those with family members who have had this cancer.

What are the symptoms?

In the early stages, pancreatic cancer usually doesn't cause any problems, although some people get vague symptoms, such as a feeling generally unwell (called **malaise**) or weight loss.

Most people first get symptoms when their cancer grows and spreads. For example, if the tumour blocks the flow of bile from your liver, you might get:

- yellow skin (jaundice)
- dark urine
- pale stools, and

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- itching.

As the tumour grows, you might:

- have pain in your back or abdomen
- feel very tired
- lose your appetite, and
- lose weight.

If the tumour blocks the tube from your stomach to your bowels, you may feel sick and vomit.

These symptoms can be caused by other illnesses that are less serious than pancreatic cancer. But it's important not to ignore them. The sooner your doctor checks them out, the more quickly you can get treatment for whatever is causing them.

Pancreatic cancer can be difficult to diagnose. The first doctor you see is likely to be your usual doctor. If your doctor thinks that your symptoms could be due to pancreatic cancer, you'll be referred to specialist doctors for tests to be certain.

The doctors will find out whether you have pancreatic cancer based on:

- your symptoms
- a physical examination
- blood tests, and
- scans to look at your internal organs.

They may also need to take a sample of cells from your pancreas (a **biopsy**) to be tested for cancer cells.

If doctors are fairly sure from other tests that you have pancreatic cancer and they want to operate to remove it, you may not need a biopsy. Your doctors will look at the tumour and test it for cancer during the operation.

What treatments work?

Your treatment will depend on the **stage** of your pancreatic cancer. The stage of cancer describes how far the cancer has spread.

- **Early stage** cancers have not spread outside the pancreas, or have not spread very far.
- **Later stage** cancers have spread to other parts of your body.

Surgery to remove your cancer

If you have early stage pancreatic cancer, you may be able to have surgery to remove part, or all, of your pancreas.

There are different ways of doing the operation depending on where in your pancreas the cancer is.

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The most common operation is to remove the part of the pancreas called the **head**. The surgeon will also remove parts of other organs nearby, such as your duodenum (the first part of your small bowel).

Your doctor will be able to tell you if your cancer is suitable for surgery and how this is likely to help you.

Unfortunately, surgery will not work for everyone who is diagnosed with early stage cancer. Some cancer cells may have already gone into your bloodstream before your surgery, but have not shown up in tests.

These cells may have travelled around your body and caused cancers in other locations. Surgery on the pancreas cannot get rid of these cancers.

Surgery to remove pancreatic cancer is a major operation. You'll need a **general anaesthetic** to keep you asleep during surgery. And you're likely to need a couple of weeks in hospital to recover.

Problems (**complications**) can happen during or after your operation. For example, it's possible for digestive juices from the pancreas to leak into your body.

Other possible problems include:

- bleeding
- an infection, and
- inflammation (swelling).

Complications may be less likely if you have surgery in a specialist centre that does a lot of operations for pancreatic cancer.

Chemotherapy, radiotherapy, and chemoradiotherapy

These treatments are occasionally used before surgery to shrink the cancer so it is easier to remove. More commonly, they are used after surgery to help kill any cancer cells that were left behind by the operation.

These treatments are also often offered to people with more advanced cancer who aren't able to have surgery.

Chemotherapy uses medicines to kill cancer cells. You'll probably be given these medicines directly into your bloodstream through a tube inserted into a vein (an intravenous infusion).

Radiotherapy kills cancer cells by directing high-energy x-rays into parts of your body where there may be cancer. When these treatments are combined, it is called **chemoradiotherapy**.

By killing cancer cells and slowing down the growth of the cancer, these treatments can help people live longer. They can also help improve the symptoms caused by the cancer.

All of these treatments can cause **side effects**, which some people find difficult to cope with. You and your doctors will discuss the possible benefits and risks of treatment so you can decide what approach is right for you.

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Other treatments to help with symptoms

Surgery to remove your cancer, chemotherapy, and radiotherapy can all help to improve your symptoms. Your doctor may recommend the following treatments as well.

Medicines to help with pain

People with pancreatic cancer sometimes get pain in their abdomen, in their back, or both.

If you have pain, be sure to discuss this with your doctors. There is a range of pain medicines that can help, from non-prescription options to stronger prescription medicines.

If one medicine doesn't help enough, your doctor can recommend other options.

Medicines to help with digestion

Your pancreas helps you digest food, but it may not be able to do its job very well if you have pancreatic cancer, or if you've had surgery on your pancreas to remove your cancer.

To help, doctors recommend taking **pancreatic enzyme supplements**.

These medicines can improve your digestion and help you maintain your weight. Your doctors will also monitor your diet and may recommend other supplements.

Treatments to help with blockages

Some common symptoms of pancreatic cancer are caused by the cancer blocking the common bile duct. This stops bile flowing from your liver to your small bowel.

If this happens it can cause:

- jaundice
- itching
- nausea, and
- an uncomfortable feeling in your bowels.

If you are able to have surgery to remove your cancer, this should remove the blockage.

But if you can't have this surgery, or can't have it right away, your doctors may instead recommend having a small tube (called a **stent**) fitted inside the duct to open it up.

Another way doctors can relieve the blockage to the bile duct is to cut the duct just above the blockage and rejoin the duct to your small bowel.

After your operation, bile will bypass all or part of your bile duct and drain into your bowel. This is called a **biliary bypass**.

Taking part in clinical trials

Doctors are still learning what treatments work best for pancreatic cancer. There are many studies under way testing new treatments.

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The only way you can normally get one of these treatments is to take part in a **clinical trial**. Your doctor will be able to tell you if there are trials going on in your area that might be suitable for you.

But bear in mind that you may not get the new treatment when you take part in a clinical trial. Studies usually compare a new treatment with a standard treatment. Nobody knows before the study which treatment they will get or whether one might work better than the other.

What will happen to me?

It's not possible to say exactly what will happen to you, because pancreatic cancer affects everyone differently. There are striking success stories, and some people live for many years.

But most people diagnosed with pancreatic cancer do not. In about half of people diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, it has already spread too far for surgery to work. These people generally don't live longer than about six months.

And even those who can have surgery to remove the cancer don't usually live for more than a few years.

Treatments other than surgery won't cure your cancer, but they can help shrink your tumour, slow down the progression of your cancer, and improve your symptoms.

Where to get more help

There are many charities and support groups for people with pancreatic cancer and their families. In the UK, for example, Pancreatic Cancer UK (pancreaticcancer.org.uk) provides information about pancreatic cancer, including details on the latest research, as well as support for patients and carers.

You can ask your doctors and nurses what resources are available in your area.

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