

Signs and symptoms of pancreatic cancer

This fact sheet is for people who want to know more about the symptoms of pancreatic cancer. It explains the different symptoms, what to look out for, and what to do if you have any of these symptoms.

Pancreatic cancer often doesn't cause any signs or symptoms in the early stages. This can make it hard to diagnose early. As the cancer grows, it may start to cause symptoms. The symptoms and how bad they are can vary for each person.

It's important to remember that symptoms described here can be caused by more common things. They can also be caused by conditions such as pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas), gallstones, irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) or hepatitis (inflammation of the liver).

You can also speak to our specialist nurses on our confidential Support Line. Call free on 0808 801 0707 or email support@pancreaticcancer.org.uk

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What are the symptoms of pancreatic cancer?

The information here is about the most common type of pancreatic cancer, pancreatic ductal adenocarcinoma (PDAC). There are also rarer types of pancreatic cancer called pancreatic neuroendocrine tumours (PNETs). They may cause some of the symptoms here, as well as some different symptoms.

Read more about the symptoms of pancreatic neuroendocrine tumours on our website at pancreaticcancer.org.uk/types

The symptoms of PDAC can be quite vague and may come and go to begin with. They may depend on where the cancer is in the pancreas, and you may not have all of these symptoms.

Common symptoms include:

- tummy (abdominal) and back pain
- unexplained weight loss
- and indigestion.

Other symptoms include:

- loss of appetite
- changes to bowel habits – including steatorrhoea (pale, smelly poo that may float), diarrhoea (loose watery poo) or constipation (problems emptying your bowels)
- jaundice (yellow skin and eyes, dark urine and itchy skin)
- recently diagnosed diabetes
- problems digesting food – such as feeling full quickly when eating, bloating, burping or lots of wind
- feeling and being sick (nausea and vomiting)
- and difficulty swallowing.

You may find it helpful to have a look at our information on what the pancreas does when reading our information on symptoms. Read more on our website at pancreaticcancer.org.uk/facts

What should I do if I have symptoms?

If you have jaundice (see page 4), go to your GP or accident and emergency (A&E) without delay. If you have any of the other symptoms, you don't know why you have them, and they last four weeks or more, go to your GP.

These symptoms don't necessarily mean that you have pancreatic cancer, but you should get them checked out. Your GP should make a request for you (refer you) to have tests to find out what is causing these symptoms.

If your symptoms get worse or you develop any new symptoms suddenly, you should always see your GP. If your symptoms don't improve, go back to your GP until you get a firm diagnosis, or a referral for tests to find out what's causing them.

Read more about going to your GP if you have symptoms in our factsheet, **How is pancreatic cancer diagnosed?** or on our website at pancreaticcancer.org.uk/diagnosis

Our **Ten Top Tips: Helping you speak to your GP** can help you talk to your GP about your symptoms, read more at pancreaticcancer.org.uk/talkingtoyourGP

Abdominal and back pain

Pain is a common symptom of pancreatic cancer. It often starts as general discomfort, tenderness or pain in the tummy area that can spread to the back.

Some people may have no pain at all. And pain can vary from person to person. For example, it may come and go at first but become more constant over time. It can be worse when lying down, and sitting forward can sometimes make it feel better. It may be worse after eating.

Unexplained weight loss

Losing a lot of weight for no particular reason can be a symptom of pancreatic cancer. This is because the pancreas plays an important role in digesting food. Pancreatic cancer can affect this, causing weight loss.

Your GP should refer you to have a CT scan (or an ultrasound scan if a CT scan isn't available) within two weeks if you are over 60, **and** have weight loss, **and any** of the following:

- tummy or back pain
- feeling or being sick (nausea or vomiting)
- diarrhoea (loose, watery poo)
- constipation (problems opening the bowels)
- or you have been diagnosed with diabetes in the last year.

Read more about how pancreatic cancer the tests used to diagnose pancreatic cancer on our website at pancreaticcancer.org.uk/tests

Indigestion

Indigestion (dyspepsia) can sometimes be a symptom of pancreatic cancer. Indigestion causes a painful, burning feeling in your chest, and can leave a bitter, unpleasant taste in your mouth.

These symptoms are common problems and aren't usually due to cancer.

Loss of appetite

Loss of appetite and not feeling like eating can be a common symptom of pancreatic cancer. But this can also be caused by other things.

Changes to bowel habits

Pancreatic cancer can cause diarrhoea (loose, watery poo) and constipation (problems emptying your bowels). If you are over 60, have lost weight **and** have diarrhoea **or** constipation, your GP should refer you for a scan within two weeks.

Pancreatic cancer can also cause oily, floaty poo – which is known as steatorrhoea. Poo may be large, pale, smell horrible and can be difficult to flush down the toilet. Steathorrhoea is caused by fat in the poo. It happens if pancreatic cancer has affected digestion, meaning that fat in food isn't digested properly.

Read more about how pancreatic cancer can affect your bowel habits on our website at pancreaticcancer.org.uk/diet

Jaundice

Pancreatic cancer can cause jaundice. Signs of jaundice include yellow skin and eyes, dark urine, pale poo and itchy skin. Jaundice develops when there is a build-up of a substance called bilirubin in the blood.

If you have jaundice, visit your GP or accident and emergency (A&E) without delay. Jaundice may be caused by other non-cancerous conditions such as gallstones or hepatitis (inflammation of the liver). But if you are over 40 and develop jaundice, your GP should refer you to see a specialist for tests within two weeks.

Problems digesting food

It is common for pancreatic cancer to cause problems with eating and digesting food. This is because the pancreas plays an important role in breaking down food (digestion).

Symptoms caused by problems digesting food include feeling full quickly when eating, bloating, lots of wind, and burping. But these symptoms are common problems and aren't usually due to cancer.

Feeling or being sick

Pancreatic cancer can make you feel or be sick (nausea and vomiting). If you are over 60, have lost weight **and** have nausea **or** vomiting, your GP should refer you for a scan within two weeks.

Difficulty swallowing

Some people may have problems swallowing their food. They might cough or choke when they eat, bring food back up, or feel that food is stuck in their throat.

If you have problems swallowing, go to your GP. This can also be caused by other health problems.

Other symptoms of pancreatic cancer

Other symptoms of pancreatic cancer can include:

- extreme tiredness (fatigue)
- generally feeling unwell
- fever and shivering
- blood clots in a vein (deep vein thrombosis).

If you are worried about any symptoms mentioned in this factsheet, speak to your GP.

Read about how pancreatic cancer is diagnosed in our factsheet, **How is pancreatic cancer diagnosed?** or on our website at **pancreaticcancer.org.uk/diagnosis**

Read about the risk factors of pancreatic cancer at **pancreaticcancer.org.uk/riskfactors**

Further information and support

Pancreatic Cancer UK services

We are here for everyone affected by pancreatic cancer.

We're here to support and to listen

Our free and confidential Support Line is a lifeline for thousands of people affected by pancreatic cancer. Our specialist nurses understand the issues you might be facing and their expert help will support you in coping with pancreatic cancer.

Call free on **0808 801 0707** weekdays 10am-4pm, or email **nurse@pancreaticcancer.org.uk**

We're here with the information you need

We have the most up-to-date information on everything you need to know about pancreatic cancer. We can help you every step of the way through diagnosis and treatment options to managing your symptoms and the care you receive.

Go to **pancreaticcancer.org.uk/informationandsupport**

Download or order our free publications at **pancreaticcancer.org.uk/publications** or call **0808 801 0707**

Find an A-Z of medical words at **pancreaticcancer.org.uk/medicalwords**

We're here so you can share

Our Forum is a supportive place where everyone affected by pancreatic cancer can be there for each other online, any time of day or night:

forum.pancreaticcancer.org.uk

The local support groups mean you can meet other people to share your experiences: **pancreaticcancer.org.uk/supportgroups**

And our Living with Pancreatic Cancer Support Days provide local face to face support in an informal setting for people with pancreatic cancer:

pancreaticcancer.org.uk/supportdays

Useful organisations

Cancer Research UK

www.cancerresearchuk.org

Helpline: 0808 800 4040 (Mon-Fri 9am-5pm)

Information for anyone affected by cancer.

Healthtalk.org

www.healthtalk.org

Personal and patient experiences presented in written, audio and video formats, including people talking about pancreatic cancer.

Macmillan Cancer Support

www.macmillan.org.uk

Support Line: 0808 808 00 00 (Mon-Fri 9am-8pm)

Provides practical, medical and financial support for anyone affected by cancer.

Maggie's Centres

www.maggiescentres.org

Tel: 0300 123 1801

Centres around the UK and online for free, comprehensive support for anyone affected by cancer.

Net Patient Foundation

www.netpatientfoundation.org

Call free on 0800 434 6476

Information and support for people with neuroendocrine tumours (NETs).

NHS 24

www.nhs24.com

Tel: 111 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week)

Out of hours service for Scotland. Provides health information and advice, and you can search for local services.

NHS Choices

www.nhs.uk

Provides information about health conditions, living well, care, and local services in England.

NHS Direct Wales

www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk

Health information in Wales, including local services.

nidirect

www.nidirect.gov.uk

Information about local services in Northern Ireland, including health services and information and support for carers.

Speak to our specialist nurses on our free Support Line

0808 801 0707

support@pancreaticcancer.org.uk

This fact sheet has been produced by the Support and Information Team at Pancreatic Cancer UK. It has been reviewed by health professionals and people affected by pancreatic cancer.

References to the sources of information used to write this fact sheet and a list of health professionals who reviewed it are available on our website –

pancreaticcancer.org.uk

Pancreatic Cancer UK makes every effort to make sure that our services provide up-to-date, unbiased and accurate information about pancreatic cancer. We hope that this information will add to the medical advice you have received and help you to take part in decisions related to your treatment and care. This information should not replace information and advice from your medical team – please speak to your doctor, nurse or other members of your medical team about any questions or concerns.

Give us your feedback

We hope you have found this information helpful. We are always keen to improve our information, so let us know if you have any comments or suggestions. Email us at **publications@pancreaticcancer.org.uk** or write to the Information Manager at the address below.

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Review date August 2020

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0808 801 0707
support@pancreaticcancer.org.uk