

Fact Sheet - Symptoms of Pancreatic Cancer

Diagnosis

Pancreatic cancer is often difficult to diagnose, because the pancreas lies deep in the abdomen, behind the stomach, so tumors are not felt during a physical exam. Pancreatic cancer is often called the “silent” cancer because the tumor can grow for many years before it causes pressure, pain, or other signs of illness. When symptoms do appear, they can vary depending on the size of the tumor and where it is located on the pancreas. For these reasons, the symptoms of pancreatic cancer are seldom recognized until the cancer has progressed to an advanced stage and often spread to other areas of the body.

General Symptoms

Pain

The first symptom of pancreatic cancer is often pain, because the tumors invade nerve clusters. Pain can be felt in the stomach area and/or in the back. The pain is generally worse after eating and when lying down, and is sometimes relieved by bending forward. Pain is more common in cancers of the body and tail of the pancreas. The abdomen may also be generally tender or painful if the liver, pancreas or gall bladder are inflamed or enlarged. It is important to keep in mind that there are many other causes of abdominal and back pain!

Jaundice

More than half of pancreatic cancer sufferers have jaundice, a yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes. Jaundice is caused by a build-up bilirubin, a substance which is made in the liver and a component of bile. Bilirubin contains a lot of yellow pigment, and gives bile it's color. Normally, bile travels down the bile duct into the small intestine. When the bile duct is blocked, however (as is often the case in cases of cancer of the head of the pancreas), the bile cannot reach the intestines and instead accumulates in tissues, blood and the skin, turning them yellow. In cases of jaundice, the urine is darker than normal and the stool may be lighter in color. Blockages can also prevent the delivery of certain digestive juices (bile salts) to the intestines. The bile salts enter the bloodstream and can eventually cause severe itching in the skin.

The presence of jaundice does not necessarily mean that someone has pancreatic cancer. There are other, more common, causes of jaundice, such as hepatitis or gallstones.

Fatigue

Patients with pancreatic cancer may feel very tired and worn out.

Digestive Problems

Nausea and vomiting

Nausea and vomiting may result from a blocked duodenum (the upper part of the small intestine).

Weight loss/ loss of appetite

The weight loss that is observed in most patients with pancreatic cancer results primarily from loss of appetite, although malabsorption of fats due to an inadequate supply of pancreatic enzymes may also be a factor in the initial stage of the disease.

Other Illnesses

Diabetes

New onset of diabetes in a person older than 40 years old (who does not have chronic pancreatitis) is often seen up to one or two years before pancreatic cancer is found.

Swollen Gallbladder

A swollen gallbladder can be felt and seen in imaging studies, and is often an indicator of pancreatic cancer.

Blood Clots

Substances released by cancer cells can sometimes cause blood clots to form in the veins. Clots can also sometimes travel to the lungs and cause problems breathing.

Symptoms of Islet Cell Cancers

A small number of pancreatic cancer cases are islet cell cancers. This form of cancer causes the pancreas to make too much insulin which results in low blood sugar levels. The symptoms of this cancer may include weakness and dizziness. The patient may also experience chills, muscle spasms and diarrhea.



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