

Fact Sheet - Chronic Pancreatitis

Chronic pancreatitis is a progressive disorder of the pancreas which causes destruction of the pancreas.

Symptoms of Chronic Pancreatitis

Initially chronic pancreatitis is often confused with acute pancreatitis because the symptoms are similar. The most common symptom is upper abdominal pain. The pain may radiate directly through to the back. The second most common symptom is diarrhea. As the disease becomes more chronic, patients develop malnutrition and weight loss. If the pancreas becomes destroyed in the later stages, patients may develop diabetes mellitus.

Diagnosis of Chronic Pancreatitis

The diagnosis of chronic pancreatitis is difficult because routine blood studies (such as amylase and lipase levels) do not necessarily show elevations. The most important clue to a proper diagnosis is an accurate medical history. There are many diagnostic tests that can be used for chronic pancreatitis. The evaluation should begin with an abdominal x-ray. The finding of pancreatic calcification is virtually diagnostic of chronic pancreatitis but quite often this is not found. There are several other tests that can be used to diagnose chronic pancreatitis:

Ultrasonography This method uses high-frequency sound waves that are above the human audible range. An instrument sends sound waves into the patient's abdomen, and the echoes that the sound waves produce as they bounce off internal organs create a picture called a *sonogram*.

CT scanning (Computed Tomography; also called CAT scan) During a CT scan a patient is asked to lie on a table, which is then slid into a doughnut-shaped machine (called a *gantry*). Inside the gantry, an x-ray tube sends out minor doses of radiation while rotating around the patient's body. Different bodily tissues absorb different amounts of radiation. After measuring and analyzing these differences the CT scanner's computer creates detailed images.

ERCP (Endoscopic Retrograde Cholangiopancreatography) A method for taking x-rays of the common bile duct and the pancreatic ducts. The doctor passes a long, flexible tube called an endoscope down the throat, through the stomach, and into the small intestine. The doctor then injects dye into the ducts and takes x-rays.

EUS (Endoscopic Ultrasound) This is a test that combines ultrasound (sound waves) with an endoscope. The doctor places the tube (endoscope) into the stomach and the ultrasound machine (which is at the tip of the endoscope) is used to direct sound waves to the pancreas.

MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) The patient lies on a bed that is passed into a cylindrical machine which sends electromagnetic waves through their body. These waves affect the millions of negative- and positive-charged atoms in the patient's body; and these atoms, in turn, send out signals of their own. These signals are picked up by the scanner and sent to a computer, which converts the signals into detailed pictures.

Treatment for Chronic Pancreatitis

The treatment for chronic pancreatitis depends on the symptoms. Most therapies center on pain management and nutritional support. Oral pancreatic enzyme supplements are utilized to aid in the digestion of food. Patients who develop diabetes require insulin to control the blood sugar. In patients using alcohol, the avoidance of alcohol is central to therapy. A diet low in fat is necessary and sometimes it is easier for the patient to eat more frequently in much smaller portions.



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