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Pancreatitis

Overview

What is pancreatitis?

Pancreatitis (say: “pan-kree-ah-tie-tiss”) is inflammation (swelling) of your pancreas. The pancreas is a gland near your stomach and liver that helps you absorb and digest food. Pancreatitis can be chronic (which means it lasts a long time, up to a few years) or acute (which means it only lasts a few days).

Pancreatitis can damage your pancreas, but there are medicines that can help control your pain and help you lead a normal life.

Symptoms

What are the symptoms of pancreatitis?

The symptoms of acute pancreatitis include the following:

- Abdominal pain that spreads to your back, and is often worse when you eat
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Fever
- Rapid heart rate

People who have chronic pancreatitis also experience abdominal pain, nausea and vomiting. They may also have the following symptoms:

- High blood sugar levels
- Unintended weight loss
- Diarrhea
- Jaundice (yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes)

Causes & Risk Factors

What causes pancreatitis?

There are a number of factors that can cause pancreatitis. The most common cause of pancreatitis is alcohol abuse. Other causes include the following:

- Smoking
- Gallstones (digestive fluids that become solid and form stones in the gallbladder)
- Certain medicines
- High levels of triglycerides (a type of fat in your blood)
- High levels of parathyroid hormone in the blood (called [hyperparathyroidism](#))

- High levels of calcium in the blood (called hypercalcemia)
- Cancer of the pancreas
- Cystic fibrosis
- A family history of pancreatitis
- Abdominal surgery
- Injury to the abdomen

Diagnosis & Tests

How is pancreatitis diagnosed?

Your doctor may do tests on samples of your blood or stool. He or she may scan your abdomen using an ultrasound machine. An ultrasound uses sound waves to build a picture of what your insides look like. Your doctor may also look at your abdomen using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) or a computerized tomography (CT) scan.

Treatment

What is the treatment for pancreatitis?

If you have acute pancreatitis, you may need to stay in the hospital for a few days to get intravenous (IV) fluids, antibiotics and medicine to relieve pain. At first, you'll need to rest your pancreas by not eating or drinking.

If you have chronic pancreatitis, your treatment plan may include a low-fat diet, medicine to relieve pain, insulin to help with high blood sugar levels and enzyme tablets (pills that help you digest food). People who have pancreatitis should not drink alcohol or smoke.

You may need more tests or even surgery if your pain is chronic or severe. Some people develop diabetes or cancer of the pancreas because of the damage caused by chronic pancreatitis. These conditions need separate treatment.

What else can I expect?

Pancreatitis can be an ongoing disease. Your symptoms may get worse or go away for a while, then come back. You may feel depressed, angry or frustrated. Chronic pain may make it hard for you to do your daily activities. Talk to your doctor about ways to manage these challenges.

What can I do?

To help manage your pancreatitis, you should do the following:

- Follow your doctor's instructions carefully.
- Work with your doctor to plan a healthy, low-fat diet.
- [Quit smoking](#) and stop drinking alcohol. Talk to your doctor about ways to quit.
- Drink plenty of water to stay hydrated. Pancreatitis can cause dehydration.
- If chronic pancreatitis is causing [depression](#), talk to your doctor. It may help to take medicine for depression and/or to talk with a counselor about how you feel.
- Develop a list of goals to improve your quality of life, such as sleeping better or exercising. To reduce stress, learn relaxation exercises.

Other Organizations

- [National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse](#)

- [American Gastroenterological Association](#)

Questions to Ask Your Doctor

- What types of medicines treat pancreatitis, and what are the side effects?
- Is pancreatitis a sign of another health condition?
- What types of lifestyle changes can I make that help treat pancreatitis?
- What can I do to prevent pancreatitis from getting worse?
- Will I need surgery? Are there other options?
- Does pancreatitis run in families?

Source

[Chronic Pancreatitis](#) by J. Nair, MD, and Lanika Lawler, MD (*American Family Physician* December 01, 2007, <http://www.aafp.org/afp/20071201/1679.html>)

Written by familydoctor.org editorial staff

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