

ASCO ANSWERS

PANCREATIC CANCER

WHAT IS PANCREATIC CANCER?

Pancreatic cancer begins when cells in the pancreas change and grow uncontrollably, forming a tumor. The most common type of pancreatic cancer, called ductal adenocarcinoma, begins in the cells lining the pancreatic ducts. Because pancreatic cancer often does not cause specific symptoms, it may not be found until the cancer has spread to other parts of the body.

WHAT IS THE FUNCTION OF THE PANCREAS?

The pancreas is a pear-shaped gland located in the abdomen between the stomach and the spine. It has two major components: exocrine and endocrine. The exocrine component, made up of ducts and acini (small sacs on the end of the ducts), produces specialized proteins called enzymes that help the body digest and break down food. The endocrine component is made up of cells clustered together, called the islets of Langerhans, and produces hormones, the most important one being insulin, which helps control blood sugar.

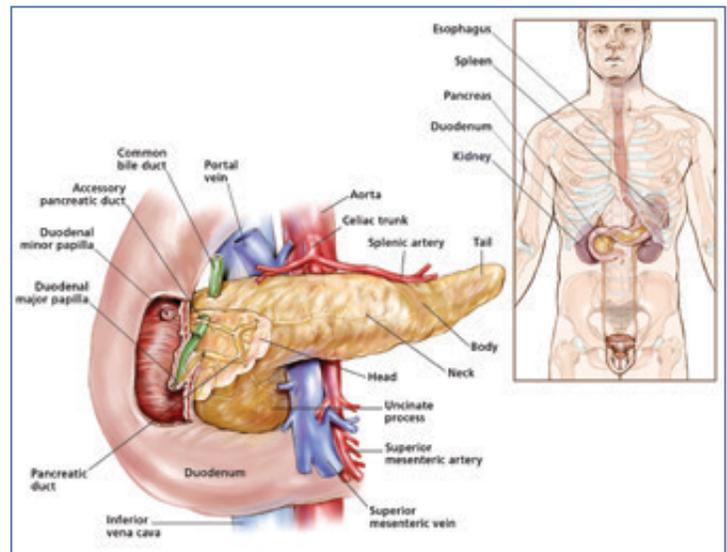


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Find additional cancer information at www.cancer.net.

WHAT DOES STAGE MEAN?

The stage is a way of describing where the cancer is located, if or where it has spread, and whether it is affecting other parts of the body. The most common method used to stage pancreatic cancer puts the cancer into one of four categories: resectable, which can be removed with surgery; borderline resectable, which can be removed with surgery after other treatment; locally advanced, which is only found in the area around the pancreas; and metastatic, which has spread to other parts of the body. Find more information about these stages at www.cancer.net/pancreatic.

HOW IS PANCREATIC CANCER TREATED?

The treatment of pancreatic cancer depends on the size and location of the tumor, whether the cancer has spread, and the person's overall health. The most common pancreatic cancer treatments are surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy, and targeted therapy. Surgery may involve removing all or part of the pancreas, along with the nearby lymph nodes, depending on the location and stage of the cancer. Radiation therapy and/or chemotherapy may be used if surgery is not recommended, before surgery to reduce the size of a tumor, or after surgery to destroy any remaining cancer cells and decrease the likelihood of the cancer returning. When making treatment decisions, people may also consider a clinical trial; talk with your doctor about all treatment options. The side effects of pancreatic cancer treatment can often be prevented or managed with the help of your health care team; this is called supportive care and is an important part of the overall treatment plan. Supportive care for pancreatic cancer includes controlling diabetes, managing pain, and improving digestion.

HOW CAN I COPE WITH PANCREATIC CANCER?

Absorbing the news of a cancer diagnosis and communicating with your doctor are key parts of the coping process. Seeking support, becoming organized, and considering a second opinion are other steps. Take care of yourself during this time. Understanding your emotions and those of people close to you can be helpful in managing the diagnosis, treatment, and healing process.

QUESTIONS TO ASK THE DOCTOR

Regular communication is important in making informed decisions about your health care. Consider asking the following questions of your health care team:

- What type of pancreatic cancer do I have?
- Can you explain my pathology report (laboratory test results) to me?
- What stage is the pancreatic cancer? What does this mean?
- Would you explain my treatment options? What clinical trials are open to me?
- What treatment plan do you recommend? Why?
- What is the goal of each treatment? Is it to eliminate the cancer, help me feel better, or both?
- Who will be part of my treatment team, and what does each member do?
- How will this treatment affect my daily life? Will I be able to work, exercise, and perform my usual activities?
- What long-term side effects may be associated with my cancer treatment?
- What can be done to help manage side effects?
- If I'm worried about managing the costs related to my cancer care, who can help me with this concern?
- Where can I find emotional support for me and my family?
- Whom should I call for questions or problems?
- Is there anything else I should be asking?

Additional questions to ask the doctor can be found at www.cancer.net/pancreatic.



Doctor-Approved Patient Information from ASCO[®]

For more information, visit ASCO's patient website, www.cancer.net, or call 888-651-3038.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Benign:

A tumor that is not cancerous

Biopsy:

Removal of a tissue sample that is then examined under a microscope to check for cancer cells

CA 19-9:

A high level of this substance, called a tumor marker, may be a sign of pancreatic cancer. It is measured with a blood test

Chemotherapy:

The use of drugs to destroy cancer cells

Lymph node:

A tiny, bean-shaped organ that fights infection

Malignant:

A tumor that is cancerous

Metastasis:

The spread of cancer from where it began to another part of the body

Oncologist:

A doctor who specializes in treating cancer

Pancreatectomy:

Part or total removal of the pancreas

Prognosis:

Chance of recovery

Radiation therapy:

The use of high-energy x-rays to destroy cancer cells

Targeted therapy:

Treatment that targets specific genes or proteins that contribute to cancer growth

Tumor:

An abnormal growth of body tissue