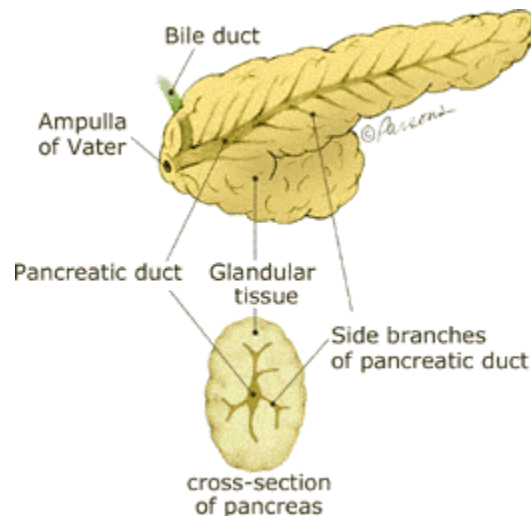




November Is Pancreatic Cancer Awareness Month

What is Pancreatic Cancer?

Pancreatic cancer is the uncontrolled growth of abnormal cells in the pancreas. The pancreas is a gland located deep in the abdomen between the stomach and the spine (backbone). The liver, intestine, blood vessels, and other organs surround the pancreas. The pancreas is about 6 inches long and is shaped like a flat pear. The widest part of the pancreas is the head, the middle section is the body, and the thinnest part is the tail.



About 90% of pancreatic cancers are found in the pancreatic ducts that make special enzymes. These enzymes help with food digestion. About two thirds of pancreatic cancers are in the head of the pancreas. This is the part closest to the beginning of the small bowel. This type of pancreatic cancer is also called adenocarcinoma, a fast growing cancer that can spread to the liver, nearby lymph nodes, and nerves surrounding the pancreas. Other types of pancreatic cancers are in the body or the tail of the pancreas and rarely spread to other parts of the pancreas. Pancreatic cancers that occur in these areas have different names depending on the type of cell that becomes cancerous.

What Are the Key Statistics About Pancreatic Cancer?

Pancreatic cancer is now the fourth leading cause of cancer deaths in the United States for both men and women. The latest statistics about pancreatic cancer show that 37,680 new cases will be diagnosed in the United States this year and that 34,290 patients will die. This is because by the time pancreatic cancer is diagnosed it is usually not curable. The only chance for cure is through surgery. Yet, about 75% of patients cannot have surgery because most patients' cancer has spread outside the pancreas or to major vessels. Of those patients who are able to have surgery, only 20-25% of those patients will be long-term survivors. This is because the disease spreads to other body sites and cannot be seen on CT scans, MRI, or during surgery since it is so small. Surgery can often lengthen survival time as well as maintain better quality of life, even if the disease returns at a later time.

Who's At Risk?

- Cigarette smoking has a strong connection to the risk of developing pancreatic cancer. The risk is higher in people who smoke more cigarettes and for longer periods of time. The risk slowly decreases once a person stops smoking.
- In the United States, African-Americans have a slightly higher risk of pancreatic cancer than Caucasians.
- Rates are also higher in the industrialized countries, such as Japan, and Western European countries.
- Age is a risk factor. Pancreatic cancer is not common under the age of 50, but increases to its highest occurrence between the ages of 60 to 80.
- There have been some studies showing that prior radiation, diabetes mellitus, pancreatitis, poor nutrition, and occupational exposures increase the risk, but no definite causes have been found yet.

What Are Signs and Symptoms of Pancreatic Cancer?

Most pancreatic cancers spread to sites outside of the original tumor before there are any signs and symptoms. This is because the early symptoms such as fatigue, weight loss, loss of appetite, indigestion, nausea, vomiting, back pain, and abdominal pain can be the result of many common problems such as flu, ulcers, and busy lifestyles. When the cancer blocks the bile ducts that drain from the liver into the small bowel, the bile backs up into the blood stream. Bile salts may leak out from the blood stream and can cause the skin to turn yellow (jaundice) and itch. The whites of the eyes may also turn yellow. Jaundice without pain is the most common symptom that sends a person to the doctor, followed by unusual back pain and the sudden start of diabetes.

Can Pancreatic Cancer Be Found Early?

Unfortunately, there are no current screening or early detection tests for pancreatic cancer. It is thought to be caused by a complicated process involving cancer-causing genes. These changes have been found in stool, bile, blood, pancreatic enzyme juices, and duodenal (upper small bowel) juices. There is hope that some day there will be tests so that people at high risk for pancreatic cancer can have early testing and start treatment earlier.

Can Pancreatic Cancer Be Prevented?

Only cigarette smoking has been shown to have a link to pancreatic cancer. Diets high in alcohol, coffee, red meat, carbohydrates, cholesterol, salt, dehydrated food, fried food, refined sugar, soybeans, and nitrosamines (used in salted and cured meats) are thought to be linked to pancreatic cancer. Some foods, such as those with fiber and vitamin C, as well as fruits, vegetables, preservative-free foods, and raw foods, are thought to help protect a person from developing pancreatic cancer. The use of pressure-cooking and microwave cooking are also thought to help protect a person from developing pancreatic cancer, yet no studies have been done to prove this. At this time, there is little evidence that these factors contribute to decreasing the risk of developing pancreatic cancer.

Cancer Prevention Clinical Trials

If you would like further information about clinical trials (available in New Jersey) for preventing cancer, please call New Jersey Cancer Trials Connect at 1-866-788-3929 or visit the Web site at www.njctc.org. For additional information about nationwide cancer prevention trials, you can also call the National Cancer Institute at 1-800-4 CANCER or visit their Web site at www.cancer.gov.

Where Can I Find Further Information?

The Resource and Learning Center
732-235-9639
www.cinj.org/rlc

Pancreatic Cancer Action Network
1-877-272-6226
www.pancan.org

The Lustgarten Foundation for Pancreatic Cancer Research
1-866-789-1000
www.lustgartenfoundation.org

National Cancer Institute
1-800-422-6237
www.cancer.gov

The American Cancer Society
1-800-227-2345
www.cancer.org