

ASCO ANSWERS

PANCREATIC CANCER

WHAT IS PANCREATIC CANCER?

Pancreatic cancer begins when cells in the pancreas grow without control and form 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 detected until the cancer has spread to other areas 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 that is composed of two major components: exocrine and endocrine. The exocrine component, made up of ducts and acini (small sacs on the end of the ducts), produces enzymes (specialized proteins) 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 critical one being insulin, which helps control blood sugar.

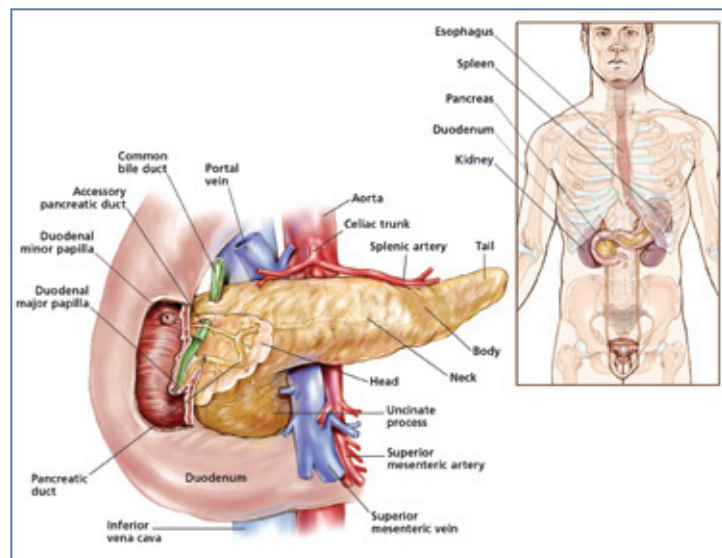


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Find additional cancer information at www.cancer.net.

WHAT DOES STAGE MEAN?

The stage is a way of describing the cancer, such as where it is located, if or where it has spread, and if it is affecting the functions of other organs in the body. The most common method used to stage pancreatic cancer places the cancer into three categories: resectable, which can be removed using surgery; locally advanced, which is limited to the area around the pancreas; and metastatic, which has spread to other areas of the body.

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. There are three basic ways to treat pancreatic cancer: surgery, radiation therapy, and chemotherapy. Surgery may involve removing all or part of the pancreas, depending on the location and size of the cancer. Radiation therapy and/or chemotherapy may be used before surgery to reduce the size of a tumor, but they are used most often after surgery to kill 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.

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 doctors:

- 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?
- Has the cancer spread to my lymph nodes or anywhere else?
- Would you explain my treatment options?
- What clinical trials are open to me?
- What are the goals of this treatment, such as improvement in survival, relief of symptoms, or shrinkage of the tumor?
- How will this treatment benefit me?
- How will this treatment affect my daily life? Will I be able to work, exercise, and perform my usual activities?
- Will this treatment affect my ability to become pregnant or have children?
- What is the expected timeline for my treatment plan?
- What long-term side effects may be associated with my cancer treatment?
- Where can I find emotional support for me and my family?
- Whom do 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.

Information in ASCO's patient education materials is not intended as medical advice or as a substitute for the treating doctor's own professional judgment; nor does it imply ASCO endorsement of any product, service, or company.

ASCO believes that all treatment decisions should be made between patients and their doctors.

**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 substance, called a tumor marker, that may be a sign of pancreatic cancer and 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 the cancer began to another part of the body

Oncologist:

A doctor who specializes in treating people with 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

Tumor:

A mass of tissue that requires a biopsy