

Signs and symptoms of pancreatic cancer

This fact sheet is for people who want to know more about the symptoms of pancreatic cancer. It explains the different symptoms, what to look out for, and what to do if you are worried about any of these symptoms.

The information here is about the most common type of pancreatic cancer, pancreatic ductal adenocarcinoma (PDAC). Rarer pancreatic neuroendocrine cancers (also called pancreatic neuroendocrine tumours or pancreatic NETs) may cause some of these symptoms, as well as other symptoms.



Read more about pancreatic neuroendocrine cancers on our website at: **pancreaticcancer.org.uk/types**



You can speak to our specialist nurses on our confidential Support Line if you have questions about symptoms. Call free on **0808 801 0707** or email **nurse@pancreaticcancer.org.uk**

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What is the pancreas?

Your pancreas does two main things.

- It makes enzymes. Enzymes help to break down food so your body can absorb it. This is part of digestion.
- It makes hormones, including insulin, which control sugar levels in the blood.

Pancreatic cancer can affect how well the pancreas works. You may have problems digesting your food and controlling the sugar levels in your blood.

What are the symptoms of pancreatic cancer?

Pancreatic cancer often doesn't cause symptoms in the early stages. As the cancer grows, it may start to cause symptoms. The symptoms may not be specific to pancreatic cancer, and they may come and go to begin with. This can make pancreatic cancer hard to diagnose.

Pancreatic cancer affects men and women in the same way. Someone with pancreatic cancer may not have all the symptoms listed here, and symptoms can vary for each person.

These symptoms can be caused by lots of things other than pancreatic cancer. If you are feeling unwell and you have any of the symptoms in this fact sheet, speak to your GP to check if there is anything wrong.



Common symptoms

Common symptoms of pancreatic cancer include:

- indigestion
- tummy pain or back pain
- changes to your poo, such as pale smelly poo that floats and is hard to flush (steatorrhoea), diarrhoea (runny poo) or constipation (when you find it harder to poo)
- weight loss
- jaundice (yellow skin and eyes, dark pee and itchy skin).

Other symptoms you might get include:

- losing your appetite
- recently diagnosed diabetes
- problems with eating and digesting food, such as feeling full quickly when eating, bloating, burping or having lots of wind
- feeling or being sick
- blood clots
- feeling very tired (fatigue).

If you are worried about any of the symptoms listed here, speak to your GP.

Indigestion

Indigestion causes a painful, burning feeling in your chest. It can also leave a bitter, unpleasant taste in your mouth.

Indigestion can be a symptom of pancreatic cancer, but it can also be a symptom of more common problems and not due to pancreatic cancer. Speak to your GP if you get indigestion a lot, especially if you have any of the other symptoms here.

Tummy pain or back pain

Tummy pain or back pain, or sometimes both, are common symptoms of pancreatic cancer. The pain may start as general discomfort or tenderness in the tummy area and spread to the back.

Some people have no pain at all, and pain can vary from person to person. For example, it may come and go at first but become more constant over time. It can be worse when lying down. Sitting forward can sometimes make it feel better. It may be worse after eating.

If you have lost weight without meaning to and have tummy or back pain, your GP should refer you for an urgent CT scan or ultrasound scan within 2 weeks.

Changes to your poo

Pancreatic cancer can cause diarrhoea (runny poo) and constipation (when you find it harder to poo). If you have diarrhoea for more than 7 days and you don't know why, call NHS 111 or your GP. If you have lost weight and have diarrhoea or constipation, your GP should refer you for an urgent CT scan or ultrasound scan within 2 weeks.

Pancreatic cancer can also cause pale, oily poo. This is called steatorrhea. Poo may be large, bulky, smell horrible, and may float and be difficult to flush down the toilet. This is caused by fat in the poo. It happens if pancreatic cancer has affected your digestion, so that fat in your food isn't digested properly.

Weight loss

Losing a lot of weight without meaning to can be a symptom of pancreatic cancer. The pancreas plays an important role in digesting food and controlling your blood sugar levels. Pancreatic cancer can affect this and cause weight loss.

If you have lost weight and don't know why, you should see your GP to find out what is causing this.

Your GP should refer you to have an urgent CT scan within 2 weeks if you have lost weight and have any of the following symptoms:

- tummy or back pain
- feeling sick or being sick
- diarrhoea
- constipation
- or you have been diagnosed with diabetes in the last year.

If a CT scan isn't available, you may be sent for an ultrasound scan.

Jaundice

Signs of jaundice include yellow skin and eyes, dark pee, pale poo and itchy skin. Some people also feel sick, lose weight, lose their appetite, or feel tired.

Pancreatic cancer can cause jaundice by blocking the bile duct. The bile duct is the tube that takes bile from the liver to the duodenum (the first part of the small intestine). Bile is a fluid made by the liver to help digest food.

Jaundice can be caused by other non-cancerous conditions such as gallstones and hepatitis (inflammation of the liver), or other cancers.

If you think you have jaundice, go to your GP or A&E straight away.

Losing your appetite

Losing your appetite and not feeling like eating can be a symptom of pancreatic cancer, but it can also be caused by other things. Speak to your GP if you have lost your appetite and you don't know why.

Recently diagnosed diabetes

Diabetes is a condition where the amount of sugar in the blood (blood sugar level) is too high. The pancreas produces a hormone called insulin, which helps to control the blood sugar level. Pancreatic cancer can stop the pancreas producing enough insulin, which can cause diabetes.

Symptoms of diabetes include feeling very thirsty, peeing more often than normal (especially at night), losing weight quickly, and feeling tired.

Speak to your GP if you have been diagnosed with diabetes in the last 6-12 months and have any other symptoms listed in this fact sheet. You should also speak to your GP if you have diabetes that has become more difficult to control recently.

Your GP should refer you for an urgent CT scan within 2 weeks if you have lost weight and have been diagnosed with diabetes recently.

Problems digesting your food

The pancreas plays an important role in breaking down food (digestion). It's common for pancreatic cancer to cause problems with eating and digesting food.

Symptoms of this include feeling full up quickly when you eat, a bloated tummy, lots of wind, and burping. But these symptoms can be common problems and aren't usually due to pancreatic cancer.

Feeling or being sick

Pancreatic cancer can make you feel sick or be sick (nausea and vomiting). If you are being sick for more than 2 days and you don't know why, call NHS 111 or go to A&E.

If you have lost weight without meaning to and have nausea or vomiting, your GP should refer you for an urgent CT scan or an ultrasound scan within 2 weeks.

Blood clots

Pancreatic cancer can cause blood to form clots in a vein. This is known as deep vein thrombosis (DVT). Blood clots often happen in your lower leg, but they can happen anywhere in your arms or legs.

Some people don't get any symptoms of blood clots. Other people may have some pain, swelling or redness in the area of the clot, and the affected area might feel warm to touch. If you have any of these symptoms it's important to speak to your GP straight away. These symptoms can be caused by other things, but it's worth having them checked.

Sometimes, part of a blood clot can break off and travel to the lungs, where it can cause a blockage. This is called a pulmonary embolism (PE). This is serious and may cause sudden shortness of breath or chest pain. It's important to see a GP if you have these symptoms. Or go to A&E if you can't get in touch with your GP.

Feeling very tired (fatigue)

Fatigue is when you feel very tired all the time, even if you rest. It can be exhausting and draining. If you have fatigue and you don't know why, speak to your GP about what may be causing it and if there is anything that can help.

Less common symptoms

There are also some less common symptoms of pancreatic cancer. These include a fever, shivering, and generally feeling unwell or not quite right. Some people also feel like they can't swallow their food properly. This may be because the cancer can make you feel full quickly when you eat. Depression and anxiety without any obvious cause may also be a symptom.

What should I do if I have symptoms?

If you have jaundice (see page 5), go to your GP or A&E straight away.

If you have any of the other symptoms and you don't know why you have them, go to your GP or contact NHS 111. NHS 111 will give you advice and arrange for you to talk to a doctor if you need to. Give the GP or NHS 111 a good description of your symptoms. Mention anything unusual, even if you are not sure if it's relevant.

It's important to remember that having these symptoms doesn't always mean that you have pancreatic cancer, but you should get them checked out. These symptoms can be caused by more common things, or health conditions such as pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas), stomach ulcer, gallstones, irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) and hepatitis (inflammation of the liver). They can also sometimes be signs of other cancers, so you should always get them checked out.

If your symptoms get worse or you develop any new symptoms, you should always see your GP. If your symptoms don't improve, go back to your GP and ask for tests to find out if there is any condition causing them. You could keep a diary of your symptoms to show the GP.



Read more about going to your GP if you have symptoms in our fact sheet: **How is pancreatic cancer diagnosed?**

Or on our website at: pancreaticcancer.org.uk/diagnosis

Our **10 Top Tips for talking to your GP about pancreatic cancer** can help you talk to your GP about your symptoms. Read more at: pancreaticcancer.org.uk/talkingtoyourGP



Questions to ask your GP

What could be causing these symptoms?

Are there any tests I should be referred for?

How long will I have to wait for tests?

If these symptoms don't get better, how soon should I come back and see you?

Is there anything I can do to help with the symptoms?

Where can I get more information or support?

“ My stools were pale and refused to flush. I didn't think much of it as I didn't feel unwell at all, but I decided to go and see the doctor just to be sure.”

“ I realised I was losing weight a lot quicker than I had expected, and I began to be concerned. I had also noticed my urine was getting very dark and I had a pain in my back, and my stools really weren't normal – I just knew something wasn't right.”

Further information and support

Pancreatic Cancer UK services

We are here for everyone affected by pancreatic cancer.

Our specialist nurses are here to talk now

If your world has been turned upside down by a pancreatic cancer diagnosis, we are here to talk now. We can answer your questions, recommend practical steps and provide the emotional support you and those close to you need, when you need it most.

Call free on **0808 801 0707** or email **nurse@pancreaticcancer.org.uk**

Expert information

Our free information covers everything about pancreatic cancer to help you understand your diagnosis, ask questions, make decisions and live as well as you can.

Go to: **pancreaticcancer.org.uk/information**

Download or order our free publications at:
pancreaticcancer.org.uk/publications or call **0808 801 0707**

Our online forum

The forum is a supportive online space where everyone affected by pancreatic cancer can be there for each other at any time.

Go to: **forum.pancreaticcancer.org.uk**

Living with Pancreatic Cancer Online Support Sessions

Our online support sessions are hosted by our specialist pancreatic cancer nurses and will give you the chance to connect with others who have also been diagnosed.

Go to: **pancreaticcancer.org.uk/supportsessions**

Real life stories

Read other people's experiences of pancreatic cancer to find out how they coped with their diagnosis and treatment and their tips on looking after themselves.

Go to: **pancreaticcancer.org.uk/stories**

Useful organisations

Cancer Research UK

www.cancerresearchuk.org

Helpline: 0808 800 4040 (Mon-Fri 9am-5pm)

Information for anyone affected by cancer.

Healthtalk

www.healthtalk.org

Personal experiences presented in written, audio and video formats, including people talking about pancreatic cancer.

Macmillan Cancer Support

www.macmillan.org.uk

Support Line: 0808 808 00 00 (Every day, 8am-8pm)

Provides practical, medical and financial support for anyone affected by cancer.

Maggie's Centres

www.maggies.org

Telephone: 0300 123 1801

Centres around the UK and online offer free practical, emotional and social support for anyone affected by cancer.

Neuroendocrine Cancer UK

www.neuroendocrinecancer.org.uk

Helpline: 0800 434 6476 (Tues-Thurs 10am-4pm)

Information and support for people with neuroendocrine cancer.

NHS 111 Wales

www.111.wales.nhs.uk

Health information in Wales, including local services.

NHS Inform

www.nhsinform.scot

Information about health conditions, living well and local services in Scotland.

NHS website

www.nhs.uk

Information about health conditions, living well and local services in England.

nidirect

www.nidirect.gov.uk

Information about local services in Northern Ireland, including health services and information and support for carers.

This fact sheet has been produced by the Support and Information Team at Pancreatic Cancer UK.

We make every effort to make sure that our services provide up-to-date, accurate information about pancreatic cancer. We hope this will add to the medical advice you have had, and help you make decisions about your treatment and care. This information should not replace advice from the medical team – please speak to your doctor, nurse or other members of your medical team about any questions.

Email us at **publications@pancreaticcancer.org.uk** for references to the sources of information used to write this fact sheet.

Give us your feedback

We hope you have found this information helpful. We are always keen to improve our information, so let us know if you have any comments or suggestions. Email us at **publications@pancreaticcancer.org.uk** or write to our Information Manager at the address below.

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