

# Risk factors for pancreatic cancer

This fact sheet is for people who want to know more about risk factors for pancreatic cancer. It looks at the things research suggests may increase someone's risk, and what you can do to reduce your risk.



If you are worried about risk factors, you could speak to our specialist nurses on our free Support Line. Call free on **0808 801 0707** or email **nurse@pancreaticcancer.org.uk**

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# What do we know about risk factors?

We don't fully understand exactly what causes pancreatic cancer, but we do know some risk factors. A risk factor is anything that increases your chances of getting a disease.

A lot of the evidence about the risk factors for pancreatic cancer is unclear. Some studies may find that something increases the risk, while others may show that the same thing has no effect. And there may be other risk factors that researchers haven't found yet.

It's important to remember that having some of the risk factors doesn't mean you will definitely get pancreatic cancer. Remember too that people sometimes get pancreatic cancer even if they don't have any of the risk factors.

## What are the known risk factors?

There is good evidence that these things may increase your risk of pancreatic cancer:

- age (see page 3)
- smoking (see page 3)
- being overweight or obese (see page 3)
- family history of pancreatic cancer (see page 3)
- pancreatitis (see page 4)
- diabetes (see page 4).

Some evidence has suggested that the following may also increase your risk:

- history of cancer (see page 5)
- alcohol (see page 5)
- red and processed meat (see page 6)
- blood group (see page 6)
- gallstones and gall bladder surgery (see page 6).

We need more research to show whether these definitely do increase your risk.

# Main risk factors

## Age

Pancreatic cancer risk increases with age, as with many other cancers. In the UK, nearly half (47%) of people diagnosed with pancreatic cancer are aged over 75.

## Smoking

We know that smoking cigarettes and cigars can cause pancreatic cancer. It's estimated that smoking causes more than one in five pancreatic cancers (22%) in the UK. Your risk of pancreatic cancer increases the more you smoke, and the longer you have smoked for.

There's no evidence at the moment about e-cigarettes and risk of pancreatic cancer.

Stopping smoking can reduce the risk of pancreatic cancer. Around 20 years after stopping, your risk may return to what it would be if you had never smoked.

If you smoke, the NHS website has information to help you stop.

## Being overweight

Research shows that being overweight or obese increases the risk of pancreatic cancer. In the UK, around one in eight pancreatic cancers (12%) may be linked to being overweight or obese.

If you are overweight and don't have pancreatic cancer, the NHS website has information to help you lose weight.

## Family history of pancreatic cancer

Occasionally, pancreatic cancer may run in a family. This isn't common – it's less than one in ten (10%) of pancreatic cancers. It includes:

- families with two or more first-degree relatives (parent, brother, sister or child) with pancreatic cancer
- families with three or more relatives with pancreatic cancer on the same side of the family
- families with a family cancer syndrome and at least one family member with pancreatic cancer. Family cancer syndromes are rare genetic conditions where a faulty gene increases the risk of pancreatic cancer.



Read more about family history and family cancer syndromes on our website: [pancreaticcancer.org.uk/familyhistory](https://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/familyhistory)

## Pancreatitis

Pancreatitis is inflammation of the pancreas. The main symptom is tummy (abdominal) pain that may come and go but can last for hours or days. Some people feel or are sick (nausea and vomiting) during the pain. Over time, people may get pain more often and the pain may become worse. Over many years, pancreatitis can start to cause other symptoms that are linked to problems digesting food. These can be similar to some of the symptoms caused by pancreatic cancer.

Hereditary pancreatitis is a rare type of pancreatitis that runs in families. It usually starts in childhood. People with hereditary pancreatitis have a much higher risk of developing pancreatic cancer. The risk may be higher still for people who also smoke or have diabetes. The EUROPAC study is looking at hereditary pancreatitis to try to learn more about it.

Chronic pancreatitis is long-term pancreatitis. People with chronic pancreatitis have an increased risk of developing pancreatic cancer.

You can find out more about pancreatitis on the NHS website.



Read more about the EUROPAC hereditary pancreatitis study on our website:  
<https://clinicaltrialsfinderdetails.pancreaticcancer.org.uk/europac>

Read about symptoms of pancreatic cancer:  
[pancreaticcancer.org.uk/symptoms](https://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/symptoms)

## Diabetes

Diabetes is a condition where your blood sugar level isn't properly controlled. Blood sugar level is controlled by a hormone called insulin, which is produced by the pancreas.

People with diabetes may have a higher risk of developing pancreatic cancer. But diabetes is common and most people with diabetes won't get pancreatic cancer.

Diabetes can also be a symptom of pancreatic cancer. If you are over 60, have recently been diagnosed with diabetes, and have lost weight without any clear cause, speak to your GP. They should refer you for a scan within two weeks to check for any problems.



Read more about the symptoms of pancreatic cancer on our website: [pancreaticcancer.org.uk/symptoms](https://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/symptoms)

## Other possible risk factors

Some research has suggested that the following things may increase your risk of pancreatic cancer. But we need more research into them.

### History of cancer

Some research suggests that you may have a higher risk of pancreatic cancer if you have already had some other cancers. These include cancers of the breast, kidneys, mouth, larynx (voice box), uterus (womb), cervix (neck of the womb), ovaries, bladder, lungs, testicles, prostate, bowel and stomach.

This may be because some of the same things can cause these cancers, such as smoking, or there could be a genetic link. Previous cancer treatment such as radiotherapy can also sometimes increase the risk of another cancer.

### Alcohol

There is some evidence that drinking a lot of alcohol may increase the risk of pancreatic cancer and of getting it at a younger age. The risk may be higher still for people who smoke as well as drink. Drinking a moderate amount of alcohol doesn't seem to increase the risk of pancreatic cancer.

It's not clear exactly how much alcohol may increase the risk. Some studies suggest that drinking more than two units of alcohol a day may increase your risk of pancreatic cancer. Other studies have found that only much higher amounts of alcohol increase the risk. We need more research into drinking alcohol and the risk of pancreatic cancer.

The NHS website has more information about how many units of alcohol there are in different drinks and recommended drinking limits to keep the risks to your health low. There are also tips to help with cutting down on alcohol.

## Red and processed meat

Eating red meat may increase the risk of pancreatic cancer, particularly meat cooked at high temperatures. Red meat includes beef, lamb and pork.

Eating processed meat may also increase your risk of pancreatic cancer. Processed meat is meat that has been preserved by smoking, curing, salting or adding chemical preservatives. It includes sausages, ham, bacon, salami and burgers.

## Blood group

There is some evidence that people with blood groups A, AB and B may have a higher risk of developing pancreatic cancer. But people with blood group O may have a lower risk. We don't know why blood group might affect your risk, but it may be linked to genes.

## Gallstones and gall bladder surgery

Some evidence suggests that people who have gallstones or have had their gall bladder removed (cholecystectomy) may have an increased risk of pancreatic cancer.



### What can I do about risk factors?

- Contact our specialist nurses on our free Support Line if you are worried about your risk of pancreatic cancer.
- Get help to stop smoking or cut down on alcohol – the NHS website is a good place to start.
- If you are overweight and don't have pancreatic cancer, the NHS website has helpful tips to help you lose weight.
- Find out more about family history of pancreatic cancer on our website at: [pancreaticcancer.org.uk/familyhistory](http://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/familyhistory)

# More 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](mailto: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](http://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/information)**

Download or order our free publications at  
**[pancreaticcancer.org.uk/publications](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/stories)**

## Useful organisations

### Cancer Research UK

[www.cancerresearchuk.org](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org)

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

Information for anyone affected by cancer.

### EUROPAC

[www.lctu.org.uk](http://www.lctu.org.uk)

<https://clinicaltrialsfinderdetails.pancreaticcancer.org.uk/europac>

EUROPAC has a study looking at hereditary pancreatitis.

### Macmillan Cancer Support

[www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

**Support Line: 0808 808 00 00** (7 days a week, 8am-8pm)

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

### NHS 111 Wales

[www.111.wales.nhs.uk](http://www.111.wales.nhs.uk)

Health information in Wales, including local services.

### NHS inform

[www.nhsinform.scot](http://www.nhsinform.scot)

Provides information about different health conditions and living well, and local services in Scotland.

### NHS website

[www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

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

### nidirect

[www.nidirect.gov.uk](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk)

Information about local services in Northern Ireland, including health services.



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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