

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 pancreatic cancer, 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 causes pancreatic cancer?

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 research 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 does not 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 suggests that the following may also increase your risk:

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

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

What are the main risk factors?

Age

The risk of developing pancreatic cancer increases with age, as it does for many other cancers. Nearly half (47%) of people diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in the UK are aged over 75.

Smoking

We know that smoking cigarettes and cigars can cause pancreatic cancer. Researchers think 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 (also known as vapes) 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. Around one in eight pancreatic cancers (12%) in the UK 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 pancreatic cancers (10%). It includes:

- families with more than one close relative on the same side of the family
- families with a rare genetic condition that can increase the risk of pancreatic cancer and at least one family member with pancreatic cancer.

Read more about family history on our website at:

pancreaticcancer.org.uk/familyhistory

You can check your risk with our Family History Checker:

pancreaticcancer.org.uk/family-history-checker

Pancreatitis

Pancreatitis is inflammation of the pancreas. The main symptom is tummy pain that may come and go but can last for hours or days. Some people feel or are sick 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 a higher risk of developing pancreatic cancer.

You can find out more about pancreatitis on the NHS website or from GUTS UK.

Read more about the EUROPAC hereditary pancreatitis study on our website at: pancreaticcancer.org.uk/EUROPAC

Read about symptoms of pancreatic cancer at:

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 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. Speak to your GP if you have been diagnosed with diabetes in the last 6-12 months and have any other symptoms of pancreatic cancer.

You should also speak to your GP if you have diabetes that has become more difficult to control recently. They should refer you for an urgent scan if you have lost weight and have been diagnosed with diabetes recently.

Read more about the symptoms of pancreatic cancer on our website at: pancreaticcancer.org.uk/symptoms

What other possible risk factors are there?

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

Alcohol

Some research shows 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 15g or 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 it has recommended drinking limits to keep the risks to your health low. You can also find 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.

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.

Blood group

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 gallbladder surgery

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

How can I reduce my risk of pancreatic cancer?

We don't fully understand how to prevent pancreatic cancer, but these things may help reduce your risk.

- 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 tips to help you lose weight.
- Find out about pancreatic cancer that runs in families on our website at: pancreaticcancer.org.uk/familyhistory and use our Family History Checker to check your risk:
pancreaticcancer.org.uk/family-history-checker
- Contact our specialist nurses on our free Support Line if you are worried about your risk of pancreatic cancer.

More information and support

We are here for you

If you or someone you care about has pancreatic cancer, we are here to help. Find out more at: **pancreaticcancer.org.uk/support**

Our specialist nurse Support Line

Our specialist nurses are experts in pancreatic cancer. They can talk for as long as you need, as often as you like. Whether you have a long list of questions or don't know where to start, they will provide practical, honest information to help you make the right choice for you.

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

Information about pancreatic cancer

Our website, videos and publications can answer your questions. The information can help you understand what you have heard from your medical team, and make decisions about your treatment and care.

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

Download or order our free publications at:

pancreaticcancer.org.uk/publications or call **0808 801 0707**

Real life stories

Whether you want to read other people's stories or tell your own, sharing experiences of pancreatic cancer could help.

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

Useful organisations

Cancer Research UK

cancerresearchuk.org

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

Information for anyone affected by cancer.

EUROPAC

europactrial.com

pancreaticcancer.org.uk/EUROPAC

EUROPAC is a study looking at family history of pancreatic cancer and hereditary pancreatitis.

Guts UK

gutscharity.org.uk

Information for people with digestive conditions of the gut, liver and pancreas.

Macmillan Cancer Support

macmillan.org.uk

Support Line: 0808 808 0000 (7 days a week, 8am-8pm)

Provide practical, medical and financial support for anyone affected by 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.

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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