

Pancreatic Cancer

The National Cancer Institute (<http://www.cancer.gov/>), lists pancreatic cancer as one of 13 common causes of cancer and provides the following information.

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Understanding Cancer

Cancer begins in cells, the building blocks that make up *tissues*. Tissues make up the organs of the body. Normally, cells grow and divide to form new cells as the body needs them. When cells grow old, they die, and new cells take their place.

Sometimes this orderly process goes wrong. New cells form when the body does not need them, and old cells do not die when they should. These extra cells can form a mass of tissue called a growth or *tumor*.

Not all tumors are cancer. Tumors can be *benign* or *malignant*.

Benign tumors are not cancer:

- Benign tumors are rarely life-threatening.
- Usually, benign tumors can be removed, and they seldom grow back.
- Cells from benign tumors do not spread to tissues around them or to other parts of the body.

Malignant tumors are cancer:

- Malignant tumors generally are more serious than benign tumors. They may be life-threatening.
- Malignant tumors often can be removed, but they can grow back.
- Cells from malignant tumors can invade and damage nearby tissues and organs. Also, cancer cells can break away from a malignant tumor and enter the bloodstream or lymphatic system. That is how cancer cells spread from the original cancer (*primary tumor*) to form new tumors in other organs. The spread of cancer is called *metastasis*.

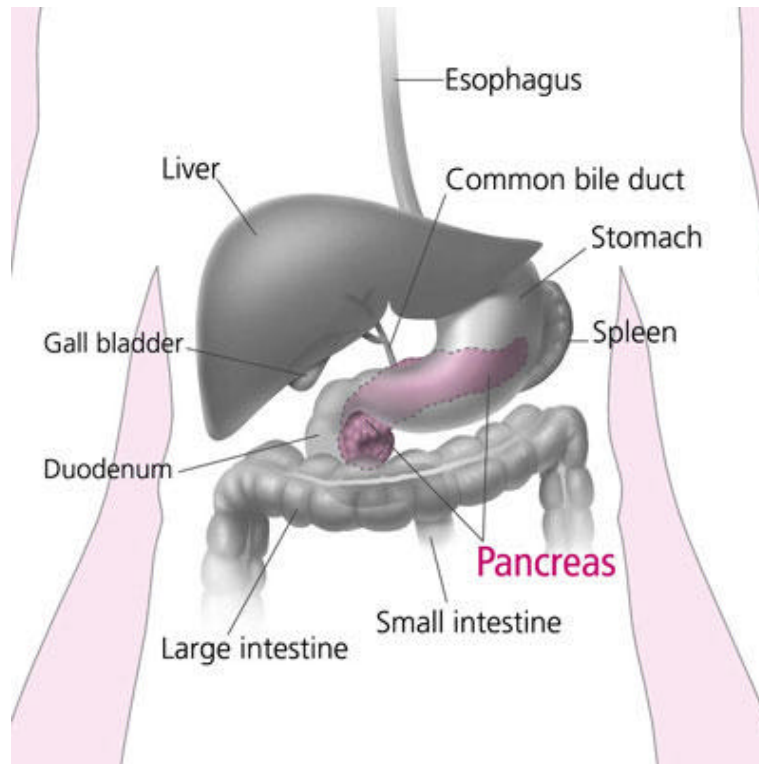
Pancreatic Cancer

The National Cancer Institute (NCI) booklet (NIH Publication No. 01-1560) has important information about *cancer* of the pancreas. In the United States, cancer of the pancreas is diagnosed in more than 29,000 people every year. It is the fifth leading cause of cancer death.

The Pancreas

The *pancreas* is a *gland* located deep in the *abdomen* between the stomach and the spine (backbone). The *liver*, *intestine*, and other organs surround the pancreas.

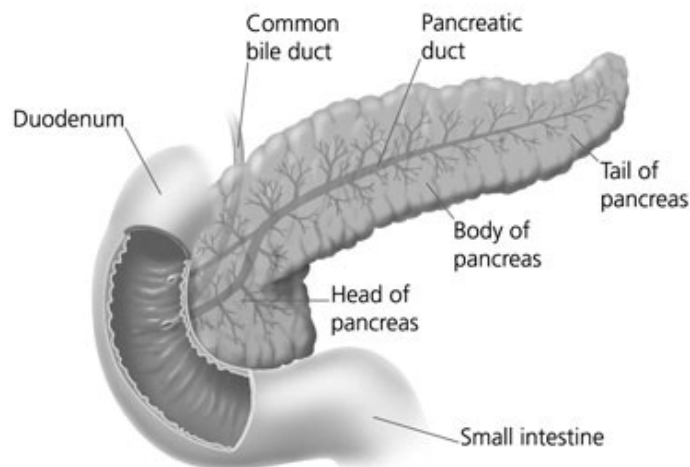
The pancreas is about 6 inches long and is shaped like a flat pear. The widest part of the pancreas is the head, the middle section is the body, and the thinnest part is the tail.



This picture shows the pancreas and nearby organs.

The pancreas makes *insulin* and other *hormones*. These hormones enter the bloodstream and travel throughout the body. They help the body use or store the energy that comes from food. For example, insulin helps control the amount of sugar in the blood.

The pancreas also makes *pancreatic juices*. These juices contain *enzymes* that help digest food. The pancreas releases the juices into a system of *ducts* leading to the *common bile duct*. The common bile duct empties into the *duodenum*, the first section of the small intestine.



This picture shows the pancreas, common bile duct, and small intestine.

Pancreatic Cancer: Who's at Risk?

No one knows the exact causes of pancreatic cancer. Doctors can seldom explain why one person gets pancreatic cancer and another does not. However, it is clear that this disease is not contagious. No one can "catch" cancer from another person.

Research has shown that people with certain *risk factors* are more likely than others to develop pancreatic cancer. A risk factor is anything that increases a person's chance of developing a disease.

Studies have found the following risk factors:

- **Age** -- The likelihood of developing pancreatic cancer increases with age. Most pancreatic cancers occur in people over the age of 60.
- **Smoking** -- Cigarette smokers are two or three times more likely than nonsmokers to develop pancreatic cancer.
- **Diabetes** -- Pancreatic cancer occurs more often in people who have diabetes than in people who do not.
- **Being male** -- More men than women are diagnosed with pancreatic cancer.
- **Being African American** -- African Americans are more likely than Asians, Hispanics, or whites to get pancreatic cancer.
- **Family history** -- The risk for developing pancreatic cancer triples if a person's mother, father, sister, or brother had the disease. Also, a family history of colon or ovarian cancer increases the risk of pancreatic cancer.
- **Chronic pancreatitis** -- Chronic pancreatitis is a painful condition of the pancreas. Some evidence suggests that chronic pancreatitis may increase the risk of pancreatic cancer.

Other studies suggest that exposure to certain chemicals in the workplace or a diet high in fat may increase the chance of getting pancreatic cancer.

Most people with known risk factors do not get pancreatic cancer. On the other hand, many who do get the disease have none of these factors. People who think they may be at risk for pancreatic cancer should discuss this concern with their doctor. The doctor may suggest ways to reduce the risk and can plan an appropriate schedule for checkups.

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