

Pancreatic Cancer

Pancreatic cancer is malignant tumor in the pancreas and one of the most deadly cancers as it is seldom detected early and spreads rapidly. It is the fourth leading cause of cancer deaths. The American Cancer Society estimates that in 2007 over 37,000 Americans will be diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and over 33,000 will die from it.

Early diagnosis of pancreatic cancer is difficult because symptoms can vary. Usually by the time symptoms or signs of pancreatic cancer occur, the disease is very advanced. Signs may include:

- Jaundice—yellowing of skin or eyes
- Abdominal or back pain--
- Unexplained weight loss or poor appetite
- Digestive problems

What Causes Pancreatic Cancer?

It has not been determined the exact cause of pancreatic cancer although age plays a part in the risk of developing pancreatic cancer. Risk factors include:

- Age—The risk of this cancer goes up with age. Almost 90% of patients are older than 55. The average age at the time the cancer is found is 72.
- Gender—Slightly more men than women get pancreatic cancer.
- Race—African American men and women are more likely to be stricken with this cancer
- Cigarette smoking—Smokers are two to three times more likely to get pancreatic cancer.
- Excess weight—Very overweight people are at a greater risk as are those who don't get much exercise.
- Diet—There may be a link between pancreatic cancer and high-fat diets that include a lot of red meat and pork, especially processed meat (such as sausage and bacon). Some studies have found that diets high in fruits and vegetables may help reduce the risk of pancreatic cancer. But not all studies have found such links, and the exact role of diet in pancreatic cancer is still under study.
- Work exposure—Working with petroleum compounds increases the risk.
- Diabetes—Insulin resistance or high insulin levels increase the risk.
- Hereditary pancreatitis—Risk is increased if you have hereditary chronic pancreatitis.

Can Pancreatic Cancer Be Prevented?

There is no sure way to prevent cancer of the pancreas at this time. For now, the best advice is to avoid smoking and to eat a healthy diet with plenty of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Cut down on red meats, especially those that are processed or high in fat. Keeping a healthy weight and exercising are also important.

Information provided by the American Cancer Society.