9 Questions to Ask Yourself to Detect Pancreatic Cancer

by ALISON RICHARDS

How to Detect Pancreatic Cancer

The pancreas is an organ located behind the stomach and is around the size of your hand. Its function is to help digest food by producing enzymes that break down sugar and fat you eat, and it also creates hormones, such as insulin. As you can see, the pancreas is rather important for your body's daily functions, so learning how to detect pancreatic cancer is beneficial.

What is Pancreatic Cancer?

Pancreatic cancer starts when abnormal cells in the pancreas grow out of control and form a tumor. The most common form of pancreatic cancer is pancreatic adenocarcinoma, which starts in the cells that line the ducts that remove digestive enzymes. Less common types of pancreatic cancer include adenosquamous carcinoma, signet ring cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma.

Not all growths in the pancreas are cancerous. However, some benign tumours go on to become cancer if left untreated. Examples of benign pancreatic cancers include serous cystic neoplasms, mucinous cystic neoplasms and solid pseudopapillary neoplasms.

What Causes Pancreatic Cancer?

For most cases of pancreatic cancer, the cause is unknown. Sometimes it is linked to an inherited gene mutation, but other times the mutation happens after birth, and is not a result of anything.

However, there are certain lifestyle factors that can increase your chances of getting pancreatic cancer. It's important to know these risks, as some are under your control, and by adopting a healthier lifestyle you will reduce your chances of getting this horrible disease.

How Can Someone Self-Evaluate Themselves for Pancreatic Cancer?

If you experience any of the symptoms above, then you should seek medical attention. You can keep a diary of symptoms and use the following checklist to help share the information with your doctor.

1. Have you lost weight in the past year without trying?
2. Are the whites of your eyes yellow?
3. Have you experienced vomiting or diarrhea for more than a couple of days?
4. Have you been constipated despite eating the same diet as usual?
5. Is your skin itchy?
6. Do you feel pain in your tummy or the middle of your back?
7. Have you been particularly tired for no reason?
8. Have you felt bloated recently?

9. Has your appetite reduced?

If you have experienced any of these, then you should consult your doctor. They may be signs of other illnesses or could be nothing to worry about. However, your doctor should check you over and ask the right questions to see if pancreatic cancer is a possibility. If your doctor is concerned, then they will send you for tests to find out more.

Risk Factors for Pancreatic Cancer

1. Age

Age is a risk factor for pancreatic cancer, as you are most likely to receive a diagnosis when you are older, with 90% of cases found in people over 55. Gender has an impact too, with more men getting pancreatic cancer than women.

2. Smoking

In the U.K., roughly 20% of cases are associated with smoking from cigarettes and cigars, as well as chewing tobacco and pipe use.

3. Obesity

Being overweight is also a risk factor and could be associated with the pancreas needing to work harder to produce insulin in someone who is obese.

4. Diabetes and Pancreatitis

Type 2 diabetes is also a risk factor for pancreatic cancer, as well as chronic pancreatitis. Chronic pancreatitis is often caused by increased alcohol intake, so that is a secondary cause. Drinking less alcohol would reduce the chances of getting pancreatitis, as well as pancreatic cancer.

5. Ethnicity

Racial origin also comes into play, with more African American people being diagnosed compared to white people. However, this may have more to do with this group experiencing other risk factors such as smoking, obesity and diabetes.

What Are the Symptoms of Pancreatic Cancer?

Often, pancreatic cancer is not caught early because there are no symptoms, or the symptoms experienced could also indicate other illnesses. This is a shame because the more advanced it is, the less treatable it is.

Jaundice

One of the symptoms is a jaundiced appearance, when the whites of your eyes or skin turn yellow. Your skin could itch, and your urine could be darker than usual. Unexplained weight loss, fatigue and lethargy are also signs of pancreatic cancer.

Change in Bowel Movements

If your bowel habits have changed, whether it is due to constipation or diarrhea, or there are any other changes in your stools, then it could indicate pancreatic cancer. You may feel bloated, have indigestion, or feel pain in your upper abdomen or the middle of your back.

However, many of these symptoms are shared with other conditions, such as irritable bowel syndrome, so it is

often tricky to diagnose pancreatic cancer.

How is Pancreatic Cancer Diagnosed?

When your doctor first examines you, they may feel your tummy for any lumps, or to see if your liver is enlarged. They will check your eyes and could carry out a urine test.

There are many different tests that are used to diagnose pancreatic cancer. These include blood tests, various scans, biopsy and laparoscopy. The scans include MRI, CT, ultrasound and PET scans.

You may also be sent for genetic testing, as some gene mutations will affect the treatment you are offered if you get a diagnosis.

Always Seek Medical Attention if You’re Concerned

If you are worried that you have signs of pancreatic cancer, then you should make an appointment to see your doctor. Your symptoms may be a result of other illnesses. If you do have pancreatic cancer, then the sooner it is diagnosed the better; if caught early the prognosis is more positive.