Risk factors for pancreatic cancer

This fact sheet is for anyone who would like to find out more about the risk factors for pancreatic cancer.

If you’re worried about whether you are at higher risk of pancreatic cancer, speak to your GP.

You can also speak to our specialist nurses on our Support Line about any questions you have about the risk factors of pancreatic cancer. You can call them free on 0808 801 0707, or email support@pancreaticcancer.org.uk

Pancreatic cancer is the 10th most common cancer in the UK. Around 8,800 people are diagnosed with it each year. About 1 in 73 men and 1 in 74 women will get pancreatic cancer at some point in their life.

The causes of cancer are complex. It may be caused by a variety of things, including your genetic make-up and lifestyle choices, such as smoking. Although scientists now know more about the causes of cancer, we still need more research.

We don’t properly understand exactly what causes pancreatic cancer, although 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 it has no effect. And there may be other risk factors that researchers haven’t yet found.

The information below is about the things research suggests may increase someone’s risk of pancreatic cancer. 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 age, smoking, being overweight, a family history of pancreatic cancer, pancreatitis, and diabetes may increase your risk of pancreatic cancer.

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

- alcohol
- red and processed meat
- history of cancer
- blood group
- hepatitis
- gum disease
- stomach or gall bladder surgery
- Helicobacter pylori infection.

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

**Main risk factors that we know about**

**Age**

The risk of developing pancreatic cancer increases with age, as it does for many cancers. In the UK, more than nine out of ten (96%) people diagnosed with pancreatic cancer are aged over 50.

**Smoking**

We know that smoking can cause pancreatic cancer. This includes smoking cigarettes, cigars and pipes, and chewing tobacco.

It’s estimated that smoking causes nearly one in three pancreatic cancer cases (29%) in the UK. Your risk of pancreatic cancer increases the more you smoke, and the longer you have smoked for.
Stopping smoking can reduce the risk of pancreatic cancer. About 20 years after stopping, your risk may return to what it would be if you had never smoked.

It’s not clear whether breathing in someone else’s smoke (passive smoking) increases the risk of pancreatic cancer.

**Being overweight**
Research shows that being overweight increases the risk of pancreatic cancer. Around one in ten pancreatic cancers (10%) may be caused by being overweight or obese.

Researchers think that in the UK, around one in six pancreatic cancer cases (16%) could be prevented each year if we all kept to a healthy weight.

**Family history of pancreatic cancer**
Occasionally, pancreatic cancer may run in a family. This is not common. It includes:
- Families with two or more first-degree relatives (a parent, brother, sister or child) with pancreatic cancer
- Families with three or more relatives with pancreatic cancer
- Families with a family cancer syndrome and at least one relative with pancreatic cancer.

Family cancer syndromes are rare genetic conditions where a faulty gene increases the risk of pancreatic cancer. Up to one in ten (10%) pancreatic cancers may be caused by one of these conditions.

Read more about family history of pancreatic cancer on our website at [pancreaticcancer.org.uk/family history](http://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/family history)

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

Hereditary pancreatitis is a rare type of pancreatitis that runs in families. It usually starts in childhood. About four in ten people (40%) with hereditary

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support@pancreaticcancer.org.uk
pancreatitis will develop pancreatic cancer by the age of 70-75. The risk may be higher for people who also smoke or have diabetes.

Chronic pancreatitis is long-term pancreatitis. It is usually caused by heavy drinking over many years. People with chronic pancreatitis have an increased risk of developing pancreatic cancer.

NHS Choices has more information about pancreatitis, including the symptoms.

**Diabetes**

Diabetes is a condition where your blood sugar level isn’t properly controlled. The 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. However, diabetes is common and most people with diabetes won’t get pancreatic cancer.

Diabetes can also be a symptom of pancreatic cancer. A symptom is any change or problem that may suggest that you have a disease. Anyone over 60 who develops diabetes and starts to lose weight without any clear cause should go to their GP.

Some studies have suggested that people with diabetes who use the drug metformin may have a lower risk of pancreatic cancer. However, other studies have found that metformin makes no difference.

**Other possible risk factors**

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

**Alcohol**

Some studies found that heavy drinking (more than three glasses of any alcoholic drink a day) may increase the risk of developing pancreatic cancer, and of getting it at a younger age. The risk may be higher still for people who smoke as well as drink heavily.

Drinking a moderate amount of alcohol doesn’t appear to increase the risk of pancreatic cancer.
Red and processed meat
Processed meat may increase the risk of pancreatic cancer. Eating around one serving (50g) a day may increase your risk. Processed meat is meat that has been preserved by smoking, curing, salting or adding chemical preservatives. It includes sausages, ham, bacon, salami and burgers.

Red meat may also increase the risk of pancreatic cancer. Red meat includes beef, lamb and pork.

History of cancer
You may have a higher risk of getting pancreatic cancer if you have already had some other cancers. These include cancers of the digestive system, breast, uterus (womb), cervix (neck of the womb), lung and testicular cancer. This may be because of lifestyle factors such as smoking, or it could be a genetic link. Some treatments for cancer, such as radiotherapy, may also increase your risk of getting another cancer.

Blood group
There is some evidence that people with blood group A may have a higher risk of developing pancreatic cancer. On the other hand, people with blood group O may have a lower risk. We don’t know why blood group might affect your risk of pancreatic cancer, but it may be linked to genes.

Hepatitis
The hepatitis virus is an infection that affects the liver. There are different types of hepatitis. Hepatitis B may increase the risk of pancreatic cancer. It isn’t very common in the UK. Hepatitis C may also increase the risk of pancreatic cancer, but the evidence for this is weaker.

Stomach of gall bladder surgery
There is some evidence that people who have had part of their stomach removed (gastrectomy) may have a higher risk of pancreatic cancer.

Evidence also suggests that people who have had their gall bladder removed (cholecystectomy) may have an increased risk of pancreatic cancer. You may have your gall bladder removed to treat painful gallstones.

Helicobacter pylori infection
Helicobacter pylori (H pylori) is a bacteria that causes stomach ulcers. Some studies have suggested that H pylori infection may increase the risk of pancreatic cancer, though we need more research into this.
Other risk factors
Some people may have a higher risk of pancreatic cancer because of other risk factors – for example, people who have recently been diagnosed with diabetes, and people with hereditary pancreatitis. Researchers are looking at screening people who are at higher risk.

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

Find out how pancreatic cancer is diagnosed at pancreaticcancer.org.uk/tests

Pancreatic Cancer UK services

Our Support Line
Our Support Line is a lifeline for thousands of patients, families and friends. Our specialist nurses understand the issues you might be facing. They are there for you, giving you personalised information and support that you need, when you need it.

Call us free on 0808 801 0707 (Monday to Friday from 10am-4pm), or email us at support@pancreaticcancer.org.uk

Our information
We have the most up-to-date information on everything you need to know about pancreatic cancer on our website. We can help you every step of the way, from explaining your diagnosis and treatment options, to managing symptoms, and questions to ask at your appointments.

Go to pancreaticcancer.org.uk/informationandsupport
Download or order our publications, for free, at pancreaticcancer.org.uk/publications

Our online community
Our online community is a supportive place where everyone affected by pancreatic cancer can be there for each other.

Find us now at forum.pancreaticcancer.org.uk

Support groups
We help set up local support groups in communities all across the UK. These groups provide the opportunity for sharing personal experiences, understanding and support. Check to see if there’s a group near you at pancreaticcancer.org.uk/supportgroups
Useful organisations

Cancer Research UK  
www.cancerresearchuk.org  
**Helpline: 0808 800 4040** (Mon-Fri 9am-5pm)  
Information for anyone affected by cancer, including information about screening.

Gov.UK  
www.gov.uk  
Provides information about government services, including information about NHS screening.

Macmillan Cancer Support  
www.macmillan.org.uk  
**Support Line: 0808 808 00 00** (Mon-Fri 9am-8pm)  
Provides practical, medical and financial support for anyone affected by cancer.

NHS 24  
www.nhs24.com  
**Tel: 111** (24 hours a day, 7 days a week)  
Out of hours service for Scotland. Provides health information and advice, and you can search for local services.

NHS Choices  
www.nhs.uk  
Provides information about different health conditions, living well and care and support, and allows you to find services in your area.

NHS Direct Wales  
www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk  
**Tel: 0845 46 47** (24 hours a day, 7 days a week)  
Health information in Wales, including local services.

nidirect  
www.nidirect.gov.uk  
Information about local services in Northern Ireland, including health services and information and support for carers.
This fact sheet has been produced by the Support and Information Team at Pancreatic Cancer UK. It has been reviewed by health professionals and people affected by pancreatic cancer.

References to the sources of information used to write this fact sheet and a list of health professionals who reviewed it are available on our website – pancreaticcancer.org.uk

Pancreatic Cancer UK makes every effort to make sure that our services provide up-to-date, unbiased and accurate information about pancreatic cancer. We hope that this information will add to the medical advice you have received and help you to take part in decisions related to your treatment and care. This information should not replace information and advice from your medical team – please speak to your doctor, nurse or other members of your medical team about any questions or concerns.

**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 the Information Manager at the address below.

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