

## **Risk Factors for pancreatic cancer**

This fact sheet is for anyone who would like to find out more about 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 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 here 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.

If you have any questions about anything in this fact sheet, speak to your doctor.

You can also speak to our specialist nurses on our Support Line about any questions you have about radiotherapy. You can call them free on **0808 801 0707**, or email [nurse@pancreaticcancer.org.uk](mailto:nurse@pancreaticcancer.org.uk)

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Speak to our specialist nurses on our free Support Line  
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[nurse@pancreaticcancer.org.uk](mailto:nurse@pancreaticcancer.org.uk)

## 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:

- red and processed meat
- history of cancer
- blood group
- gallstones and gall bladder surgery.

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

## Main risk factors

### Age

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

### Smoking

We know that smoking cigarettes and cigars can cause pancreatic cancer. It's estimated that smoking causes nearly one in three pancreatic cancers (29%) 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 and risk of pancreatic cancer.

Stopping smoking can reduce the risk of pancreatic cancer. Around 5–10 years after stopping, your risk may return to what it would be if you had never smoked.

### Being overweight

Research shows that being overweight or obese increases the risk of pancreatic cancer. Around one in eight pancreatic cancers (12%) may be linked to being overweight or obese.

Researchers think that in the UK around one in six pancreatic cancer cases (16%) could be prevented if we all kept to a healthy 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 (10%) of pancreatic cancers. It includes:

- families with two or more first-degree relatives (parent, brother, sister or child) with pancreatic cancer
- families with three or more relatives with pancreatic cancer on the same side of the family
- families with a family cancer syndrome and at least one family member with pancreatic cancer. Family cancer syndromes are rare genetic conditions where a faulty gene increases the risk of pancreatic cancer.

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

## Pancreatitis

Pancreatitis is inflammation of the pancreas. The main symptom is tummy (abdominal) pain that may come and go but can last for hours or days. Some people feel or are sick (nausea and vomiting) during the pain. Over time, people may get pain more often and it becomes 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 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 an increased risk of developing pancreatic cancer.

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

Read more about:

- the EUROPAC study on our Clinical Trial Finder at [pancreaticcancer.org.uk/trialfinder](https://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/trialfinder)
- the diet symptoms of pancreatic cancer on our website at [pancreaticcancer.org.uk/diet](https://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/diet)

## 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 developing pancreatic cancer. But diabetes is common and most people with diabetes won't get pancreatic cancer.

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Diabetes can also be a symptom of pancreatic cancer. If you are over 60, have recently been diagnosed with diabetes, and have lost weight without any clear cause, speak to your GP. They should refer you for a scan within two weeks to check for any problems.

Read about the symptoms of pancreatic cancer on our website at [pancreaticcancer.org.uk/symptoms](https://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/symptoms)

## Other possible risk factors

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

### 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.

### Alcohol

There is some evidence 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 appear to increase the risk of pancreatic cancer.

It is unclear 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, but 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.

NHS Choices has more information about how many units of alcohol there are in different drinks and recommended drinking limits to keep your health risks low.

### 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.

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### **Blood group**

There is some evidence that 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 gall bladder surgery**

Some evidence suggests that people who have gallstones or have had their gall bladder removed (cholecystectomy) may have an increased risk of pancreatic cancer, although other studies have found no link.

## Further information and support

### Pancreatic Cancer UK services

We are here for everyone affected by pancreatic cancer.

### We're here to support and to listen

Our free and confidential Support Line is a lifeline for thousands of people affected by pancreatic cancer. Our specialist nurses understand the issues you might be facing and their expert help will support you in coping with pancreatic cancer.

Call free on **0808 801 0707** weekdays 10am-4pm, or email **nurse@pancreaticcancer.org.uk**

### We're here with the information you need

We have the most up-to-date information on everything you need to know about pancreatic cancer. We can help you every step of the way through diagnosis and treatment options to managing your symptoms and the care you receive.

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

Download or order our free publications at **pancreaticcancer.org.uk/publications** or call **0808 801 0707**

Find an A-Z of medical words at **pancreaticcancer.org.uk/medicalwords**

### We're here so you can share

Our Forum is a supportive place where everyone affected by pancreatic cancer can be there for each other online, any time of day or night:

**forum.pancreaticcancer.org.uk**

The local support groups mean you can meet other people to share your experiences: **pancreaticcancer.org.uk/supportgroups**

And our Living with Pancreatic Cancer Support Days provide local face to face support in an informal setting for people with pancreatic cancer:

**pancreaticcancer.org.uk/supportdays**

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## Useful organisations

### **Cancer Research UK**

[www.cancerresearchuk.org](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org)

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

Information for anyone affected by cancer,.

### **Macmillan Cancer Support**

[www.macmillan.org.uk](http://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.

### **Maggie's Centres**

[www.maggiescentres.org](http://www.maggiescentres.org)

**Tel: 0300 123 1801**

Centres around the UK and online offer free practical, emotional and social support for anyone affected by cancer.

### **NHS Choices**

[www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

Information about health conditions, living well, care and local services in England.

### **NHS Direct Wales**

[www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk)

**Tel: 0845 46 47**

Health information in Wales, including local services.

### **NHS Inform**

[www.nhsinform.scot](http://www.nhsinform.scot)

**Telephone: 0800 22 44 88**

Provides information about different health conditions and living well, and local services in Scotland.

### **nidirect**

[www.nidirect.gov.uk](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk)

Information about local services in Northern Ireland, including health services.

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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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