

# Supporting Patients with Symptoms

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# Learning Outcomes

1. Understand diet in relation to patients with pancreatic cancer and how healthcare professionals can support patients with weight loss
2. Consider the use of pancreatic enzyme replacement therapy for patients with pancreatic enzyme insufficiency
3. To be aware of the types of pain that can occur with pancreatic cancer and tips on how to support patients through this
4. Learn useful management skills for patients experiencing fatigue
5. To be mindful of common symptoms and side effects that can occur from the disease or treatment of the disease
6. Gain knowledge of pancreatic cancer related diabetes and blood clots

## Diet and Pancreas Cancer

Malabsorption – where the pancreas is not able to produce and release the enzymes the body needs to break down the food that a person is eating

Symptoms of malabsorption include:

- Wind, bloating, gurgling
- Abdominal pain
- Weight loss
- Lack of appetite
- Pale or yellow stools that may float or have a ‘film’ on the water
- Diarrhoea

## Pancreatic Enzyme Replacement Therapy (PERT)

- Malabsorption is also known as Pancreatic Exocrine Insufficiency (PEI)
- PERT comes in the form of capsule tablets which contain enzymes
- Taken immediately prior to eating a meal or snack
- Essential that the patient is linked in with a CNS and/or Dietician
- Stool test called faecal elastase can be used to diagnose severity of PEI
- Patients must not chew the capsules

## PERT Tips

- Doses of PERT will need to be titrated as per the patients symptoms or for higher fat content meals
- Take capsules everywhere they go
- Keep a diary to monitor and track associated symptoms
- Set alarms on their phone etc if struggling to remember to take tablets
- Reassurance that it can take a number of weeks to see a difference in symptoms
- Only take PERT capsules with cold drinks
- Store in a cool, dry place

## Weight Loss

- Can be incredibly distressing for patients and relatives
- Can be caused by the cancer itself or the side effects of cancer treatment such as chemotherapy or surgery
- Patients often lose muscle tone and strength too
- Patients should be encouraged to eat a well rounded diet and avoid 'fad' diets
- Often patients need to have a 'build up' diet prior to surgery

## Taste Changes

- Can be very common
- Hard for patients to manage and psychologically very difficult
- Can be due to the disease or from chemotherapy
- Metallic taste changes
- Coffee and other foods and drinks can taste bitter

## Taste Change Tips

- Encourage patients to try things they never previously enjoyed
- Season food heavily with stronger seasonings such as garlic or spices
- Suck fruit boiled sweets before meals to stimulate taste buds and produce saliva
- Use plastic knives and forks if experiencing a metallic taste
- Keep trying foods again regularly as it may change

## Pain

- Pain is likely to affect patients at some point in their diagnosis
  - Can be very debilitating and affect patients psychologically too
  - Could impact on finances due to inability to work
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- Neuropathic/nerve pain
  - Soft tissue pain
  - Bone pain

## Treatments of Pain

- Pain killers – tailored drugs for the type of pain and increase up as needed under the guidance of a pain team
- Radiotherapy (not suitable for all patients )
- Coeliac Plexus nerve block
- Alternative measures such as accupuncture

## Top Tips for Managing Pain

- Encourage a pain diary
- Use descriptive scales to describe pain (for example 1-10 scale)
- Make sure patients are aware of side effects such as constipation
- Be mindful of the psychological effect of pain – may need added support
- Refer patients to palliative care team or pain management team
- Peer support for patients
- Involve relatives in management

## Fatigue

- The disease itself can be exhausting, adding treatment on top of this can make it worse
- 20 minute gentle walk daily can help
- Rule out any reversible causes such as low haemoglobin
- Can anyone help the patient do practical tasks such as shopping or cleaning?
- Changing timings of some medications can help

## Bowel Changes

- Can be caused by the disease, treatment, pain relief
- Diarrhoea
- Constipation
- Treatment may make pre-existing bowel conditions more unmanageable
- Encourage hydration and movement
- Medications may be needed to control bowels

## Nausea & Vomiting

- More common in patients going through chemotherapy or radiotherapy
- Needs to be carefully managed to avoid further weight loss and malnutrition
- Medications may be needed to control
- Some foods may help such as ginger

## Pancreas Cancer & Diabetes

- Not all patients will develop diabetes
- Due to pancreas not making enough or no insulin & glucagon
- Type 3c
- May need medication or insulin injections to control
- Chemotherapy medications and steroids may make blood sugars hard to manage
- Important to ensure this is carefully managed

## Blood Clot Risk

- Patients with pancreas cancer are at higher risk of blood clots, either in legs (DVT) or in the chest (PE)
- Higher risk again if on chemotherapy
- Ensure patients are educated on signs
- Fatigue and lack of movement can contribute
- Medical emergency

## Take Away Messages...

- Patients with pancreas cancer may have many complex physical, emotional and psychological needs
- Important to make sure patients and relatives have a good support team around them with clear communication
- Patient education is key

Thank you very much!