The pancreas is a gland that sits behind the stomach. It plays major roles in digesting food and controlling your body’s use of sugar.

Pancreatitis is inflammation of the pancreas that usually begins as a sudden attack and is often caused by gallstones or alcohol abuse.

Symptoms of acute pancreatitis often start with a gradual or sudden severe pain in the center part of the upper abdomen going through to the back.

Treatment for pancreatitis often focuses on relieving pain and meeting the nutritional and metabolic needs of the patient.

Most people with chronic pancreatitis have a good prognosis if they follow their treatment regimen.

If You Think You Have Acute Pancreatitis …

Call your doctor. Your doctor will:

1. Take a medical history, including the medications you take.
2. Ask about your drinking and cigarette smoking history.
3. Draw blood to test for pancreatic enzyme levels.
4. Order an X-ray or other imaging test to determine the degree of pancreas damage.
The Pancreas

The pancreas is a gland that sits behind your stomach. It plays a key role in the digestive system. Its juices flow through the pancreatic duct and join bile from the liver and gallbladder to drain into the small intestine. Specifically, the pancreas:

- Secretes digestive juices containing enzymes and sodium bicarbonate into the small intestines. These juices help digest the fats, proteins, and carbohydrates in your diet into digestible molecules.
- Produces insulin and other hormones that control your body’s ability to use sugar (glucose).

Sometimes, no cause can be identified — this is called idiopathic pancreatitis.

Acute Pancreatitis

Acute pancreatitis is the leading cause of hospitalization among digestive system diseases in the United States. It is responsible for about 270,000 hospitalizations every year.

Chronic Pancreatitis

This form of pancreatitis occurs in patients with a permanently injured or scarred pancreas. Chronic pancreatitis is typically a slowly progressive disease that takes many years to develop. It is often associated with a combination of pain, abnormal digestive function, and/or diabetes mellitus.

Chronic pancreatitis is usually caused by years of excessive alcohol consumption, but may also result from other causes. Smoking increases the risk of getting chronic pancreatitis.

Differences Between Acute and Chronic Pancreatitis

Most cases of acute pancreatitis are mild and involve a short hospital stay to help heal the damaged organs. Chronic pancreatitis, on the other hand, is usually much more persistent. It can result in organ damage and may even be fatal.

This form of pancreatitis often occurs on a gland that has been removed, or a gland that is no longer able to produce digestive juices. Acute pancreatitis can be mild or severe and may have the same symptoms. Often, the only way to distinguish between acute and chronic pancreatitis is to look for visible scar tissue in the pancreas as seen by an abdominal X-ray or other imaging procedures. Your physician will also look for evidence of chronic damage to the pancreas (such as greasy stools because it is not producing digestive enzymes) and unexplained weight loss.

Acute and Chronic Pancreatitis Symptoms

Symptoms include:

- A gradual or sudden severe pain in the center part of the abdomen that gets worse when you eat and builds to a persistent pain.
- Nausea and vomiting.
- Fever.
- Jaundice (a yellowing of the skin) due to blockage of the bile duct from the inflamed pancreas.
- Skin nodules due to leakage of digestive enzymes into the skin.
- Weight loss (with chronic pancreatitis).
- Severe or oily stools (with chronic pancreatitis).

Due to the toxic effects of alcohol and cigarette smoking on pancreatic tissue, smoking can cause very early damage. Therefore, the first attack of acute pancreatitis can often occur on a gland that is very scarred and may be considered an acute flare of chronic pancreatitis. Pancreatectomy, which are accumulations of fluid and tissue debris, may also develop.

Patients who have recurrent or chronic pancreatitis for many years may be at an increased risk for developing cancer of the pancreas. This is a rare event. Acute pancreatitis has not been shown to increase the risk of pancreatic cancer. However, it can be a manifestation of pancreatic cancer particularly in the elderly without an obvious cause of acute pancreatitis.

If you have unexplained weight loss that lasts more than a few weeks, call your doctor.

Acute Pancreatitis Treatment

Your doctor will usually admit you to the hospital to receive intensive care. Fluid and electrolyte treatment of pain and monitoring for complications. Nothing-by-mouth status will be maintained until the pain resolves and there is no nausea or vomiting for at least 24 hours. The first few days of acute pancreatitis resolve within a week. For persistent symptoms additional treatments may be necessary.

In addition:

- If the cause of acute pancreatitis is gallstones, you will typically be advised to have your gallbladder removed to prevent further attacks.
- If the bile duct is found to be enlarged, you may need a procedure called ERCP to drain it. An ERCP is a way your doctor can examine your pancreas, pancreatic duct, the bile ducts and/or the sphincter of Oddi (the muscle that controls the flow of pancreatic juice and bile into the intestine) in severe cases, surgery will be required to drain the pancreatic duct or to remove part of the pancreas.
- Your doctor will give you dietary guidelines in order to reduce the amount of fat you eat, since your body has trouble digesting these substances.
- You may also need to take pancreatic enzyme supplements with every meal. These supplements will help your body absorb food, and help you regain some of the lost weight. The low fat diet and the enzyme supplements may also help control pain by reducing stimulation of the pancreas.
- If you drink alcohol, you need to stop drinking.
- If you smoke cigarettes, you need to stop smoking.
- If you have a pancreatic pseudocyst, it may need to be drained.

Acute Pancreatitis Prevention

While pancreatitis is still not fully understood, there are some steps you can take to prevent it from occurring again:

- If the cause is gallstones and your gallbladder has not been removed, avoid fatty and greasy foods, such as butter and fried eggs.
- Work with your gastroenterologist to develop a healthy eating plan.
- Ultimately, you may need your gallbladder removed.
- Your doctor should help you decide whether this surgery is needed.
- If the cause is alcohol, you should stop drinking altogether.
- If you smoke cigarettes, you should stop smoking altogether.

Exocrine Pancreatic Failure

With chronic pancreatitis, the pancreas may eventually stop producing the enzymes that are necessary for your body to digest and absorb nutrients. This is called exocrine pancreatic failure. It plays a key role in the digestive system. Its juices flow through the pancreatic duct and join bile from the liver and gallbladder to drain into the small intestine. Specifically, it:

- Secretes digestive juices containing enzymes and sodium bicarbonate into the small intestines. These juices help digest the fats, proteins, and carbohydrates in your diet into digestible molecules.
- Produces insulin and other hormones that control your body’s ability to use sugar (glucose).

Acute Pancreatitis

Acute pancreatitis usually begins as a sudden (acute) attack. When the pancreas becomes acutely inflamed, its digestive juices or enzymes attack the tissue that produces them. One of these enzymes, called trypsin, can cause tissue damage, which causes the pancreas’ cells and blood vessels to swell. In some cases, attacks may recur repeatedly, which may cause chronic inflammation and scarring known as chronic pancreatitis.

Exocrine Pancreatic Failure

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- Various other conditions such as diabetes mellitus, renal disease and elevated blood calcium.
- High levels of fat particles (triglycerides) in the blood.
- Infections, such as mumps.
- Certain surgical procedures.
- Heredity (in patients with recurrent attacks of pancreatitis).
- Certain medications.
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