

Pancreatic cancer is sometimes called a “silent” disease because symptoms are rarely present in early stages. Many patients have advanced disease by the time it becomes noticeable to the patient and doctors. If symptoms are present, they are often vague. Patients may experience different symptoms depending on the location, type, and stage of the tumor. Symptoms that commonly lead to diagnosis include jaundice, abdominal and/or back pain, diabetes, unexplained weight loss and loss of appetite. A person with advanced pancreatic cancer may also experience ascites and blood clots. Symptoms such as fatigue, weakness, digestive difficulties and depression may occur at any time.

Symptoms commonly associated with pancreatic cancer are described below. If someone experiences one or more of the symptoms mentioned, it does not mean that she or he has pancreatic cancer. There are other common medical problems or conditions that may also cause these or similar symptoms. Therefore, anyone experiencing these symptoms should consult with a doctor. Only a doctor can diagnose the cause of an individual’s symptoms.

Ascites

Ascites is the abdominal build-up of fluid in the abdomen. This extra fluid causes the belly to become swollen and distended. Ascites may be present at anytime during the pancreatic cancer journey but it is especially common in patients with advance metastatic pancreatic cancer. The spread of cancer in the abdominal lining, or peritoneum, can result in irritation, which causes fluid build-up. As the amount of fluid increases, symptoms such as discomfort, difficulty breathing, nausea and decreased appetite may occur. Treatment with water pills, called diuretics, may slow the build-up of fluid. It can also be managed by draining the fluid through a procedure called paracentesis.

Blood Clots

Deep vein thrombosis (DVT) is a potentially serious condition where blood clots form in the veins, usually in the legs. Cancer causes changes in the blood that can increase the likelihood of forming blood clots. Blood clots may go unnoticed and cause no symptoms. However, they are often associated with swelling, pain, and tenderness in the affected area. Swelling in one leg only is often a sign of DVT. A fragment of the clot may break loose and travel to the lungs, causing damage to the lung tissue from the sudden decrease of blood supply. This is called pulmonary embolism and is a serious condition. DVT is commonly treated with drugs called anticoagulants that thin the blood and prevent existing clots from getting larger and new clots from forming.

Change in Stools

Many patients with pancreatic cancer experience diarrhea, constipation or both. Many medications can cause or aggravate diarrhea and constipation. Diarrhea is a common problem and presents as loose, watery, oily, or foul smelling stools that can be caused by insufficient amounts of pancreatic enzymes in the intestines. This leads to malabsorption as digested food passes quickly through the digestive tract. Constipation is a common problem, particularly in patients taking pain medications. These medications slow the passage of food through the intestines. If the digestive system works too slowly, it can cause stools to become dry, hard, and difficult to pass. Changes in diet and additional medications may be necessary to eliminate or reduce the severity of these symptoms.

Diabetes

Diabetes is a disease in which the body does not make or properly use a pancreatic hormone called insulin. Insulin helps the body use glucose (sugar) efficiently. Normally, insulin allows glucose to enter cells and be used for energy. In the case of diabetes, either the body does not produce enough insulin or the amount produced is not fully effective. Research studies suggest that new-onset diabetes in people over the age of 50 may be an early symptom of pancreatic cancer. A sudden change in blood sugar levels in diabetics who previously had well-controlled diabetes may also be a sign of pancreatic cancer.

Changes in diet and sometimes insulin therapy are necessary to control blood sugar levels in people with diabetes.

Digestive Difficulties

Common digestive difficulties associated with pancreatic cancer include poor appetite, indigestion, and nausea. Some or all these symptoms may occur when a tumor in the pancreas presses against the stomach or first portion of the small intestine, known as the duodenum. If this happens, food may remain in the stomach and cause several digestive difficulties, including nausea and vomiting. Digestive symptoms can also occur due to blockage of the pancreatic duct through which the pancreatic enzymes flow or due to changes in the amount of pancreatic enzymes produced. Various changes in diet, pancreatic enzyme products and other treatments can help to alleviate many digestive symptoms.

Jaundice

It is common for people with pancreatic cancer to experience jaundice. Jaundice is a yellowing of the skin and eyes caused by excess bilirubin (a component of bile) in the blood. A tumor in the head of the pancreas can cause narrowing of the bile duct and block the bile flowing from the gallbladder into the small intestine. Blockage of the bile duct causes a build up of bilirubin. People with jaundice may also experience itchiness of the skin, abnormally dark urine and light or clay-colored stools. If surgery is possible, removing the tumor can provide relief. In some cases, another type of surgery called biliary bypass surgery may be performed to bypass the blocked bile duct. Otherwise, the jaundice is usually treated by inserting a stent to keep the bile duct open. Stent placement is commonly done during a procedure known as ERCP (endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography).

Pain

Pain in the upper abdomen or mid-back may be caused by the tumor pushing against or invading nerves or organs located near the pancreas. Pain can also result if the tumor causes blockage in the digestive tract. Treatment, including pain medications and procedures such as a celiac plexus block, can be important in managing pancreatic cancer pain. Many pain medications lead to constipation which could make the pain worse. A doctor can prescribe medications to avoid constipation.

Unexplained Weight Loss

Weight loss is a common problem in patients with pancreatic cancer. The weight loss can be associated with treatment or the cancer itself. Tumor-induced weight loss (also known as cancer cachexia) is a complex problem that affects the way calories and protein are used by the body. Cancer cachexia can cause the body to burn more calories than usual, break down muscle and decrease appetite. An individual may also notice a change in appetite or desire for certain foods. Unexplained weight loss may be an early symptom of pancreatic cancer and can occur without any pain or apparent change in digestion.

Symptoms Related to Neuroendocrine Tumors

Pancreatic neuroendocrine tumors may cause the pancreas to overproduce certain enzymes or hormones, such as insulin, glucagon, or somatostatin. High levels of these hormones in the blood results in symptoms such as weight loss, nausea, vomiting, muscle weakness and skin rash.