

Diagnosing Pancreatic Cancer - A Quick Guide



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This is a brief summary of the information on 'Diagnosing pancreatic cancer' from CancerHelp UK. You will find more detailed information on the website.

In this information there are sections on

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Tests for pancreatic cancer

You usually begin by seeing your GP, who will examine you and ask about your general health. Your doctor will look at your skin and eyes and may ask you for a urine sample to check for signs of jaundice. He or she will ask you to lie down for a physical examination. The doctor can tell whether your abdomen is tender. It may be possible to feel a lump. Or your liver may feel enlarged. Afterwards your doctor will refer you to a hospital for tests and X-rays.

At the hospital

The specialist will ask about your medical history and symptoms. They will then examine you by feeling your abdomen.

You may have blood tests and a chest X-ray to check your general health. Then your specialist will arrange some tests for you. These may include an ultrasound scan, CT scan, MRI scan, ERCP, laparoscopy and a barium meal. You may be asked to come into hospital to have your tests. Or you may have them in the outpatient department.

What will all the tests show?

These tests might show that you are likely to have cancer of the pancreas. You may have a cyst or lump on your pancreas that may or may not be cancer. Your doctor may be almost certain that you do have cancer of the pancreas. But the only way to be absolutely sure is to either remove the whole lump or remove a piece of tissue from the suspicious area to check under the microscope for cancer cells. This is called a biopsy.

Having a biopsy to test for pancreatic cancer

The only certain way to diagnose a cancer is by getting a cell sample (biopsy) and looking at cells under a microscope. The easiest way to do this is by putting a needle into the area of suspected cancer, and sucking out some cells. But specialists don't usually take biopsies this way if they think



the cancer is removable with surgery. There is too much of a risk that the biopsy could spread pancreatic cancer.

If it is likely that your cancer can be removed, then your diagnosis will be made entirely by the doctor examining you and considering the results of your scans and tests. A confirmed diagnosis can be made when you have your surgery. If you have a cancer that is not removable with surgery, your specialist may want to biopsy it.

How to take a biopsy

There are several different ways your doctor can take a biopsy. Which one your doctor uses will depend on where the tumour is in the pancreas. You may have a biopsy guided by ultrasound or CT scan to see exactly where the tumour is. You may also have a biopsy during an ERCP, a laparoscopy or a laparotomy. CancerHelp UK has details of these procedures.

Further tests for pancreatic cancer

If tests show you have pancreatic cancer, you may have further tests to see if the cancer has spread. These may include a liver ultrasound, abdominal CT scan, MRI scan, chest X-ray, endoluminal ultrasound (EUS), laparoscopy and laparoscopic ultrasound. The tests can show whether it is going to be possible to completely remove your cancer or not.

You may have had some or all of these tests already when your doctor was diagnosing your cancer. You may be in hospital while you are having all your tests and your doctor may give you the diagnosis at the same time. Or you may have your tests as an outpatient and be asked to

return to the hospital when your test results have come through.

You are likely to feel very anxious while you are waiting for results. It may help to talk to a close friend or relative about how you are feeling. Or you may want to contact a cancer support group to talk to someone who has been through a similar experience.

What to ask your doctor about pancreatic cancer

- What tests are you going to do?
- What are you looking for?
- Will the tests show whether I have cancer?
- Will the tests show whether my cancer can be operated on?
- Are any of the tests painful?
- Do any of the tests have after effects?
- Can I have these tests as an outpatient?
- Should I bring someone with me when I have the tests?
- How long will the results take?
- Who will give me the test results?



Notes

More information

For more information about pancreatic cancer, visit our website
<http://cancerhelp.cancerresearchuk.org>

You will find a wide range of detailed, up to date information for people affected by cancer, including a clinical trials database that you can search for cancer trials in the UK. You can view or print the information in a larger size if you need to.

For answers to your questions about cancer call our Cancer Information Nurses on **0808 800 4040** 9am till 5pm Monday to Friday

Adapted from Cancer Research UK's Patient Information Website CancerHelp UK in March 2011. CancerHelp UK is not designed to provide medical advice or professional services and is intended to be for educational use only. The information provided through CancerHelp UK and our nurse team is not a substitute for professional care and should not be used for diagnosing or treating a health problem or disease. If you have, or suspect you may have, a health problem you should consult your doctor. © Cancer Research UK 2011. Cancer Research UK is a registered charity in England and Wales (1089464) and in Scotland (SC041666).