

### **What to look for**

Like most cancers, pancreatic cancer usually produces no symptoms until it is advanced. Symptoms that may arise are -

- weight loss with abdominal pain - these are the common signs.
- gradually worsening abdominal pain
- diarrhoea, constipation, gas pains, bloating, or belching.
- nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite.
- jaundice
- sudden onset of diabetes.
- black or bloody stool.

The pancreas has two vital functions - it supplies the intestines with digestive juices, and it secretes hormones. One of these being insulin, which regulates the body's use of sugars and starches. Endocrine cells in the pancreas regulate hormones; they form clusters and are located in the tail and body sections of the gland. Exocrine cells, which are more prolific, are spread throughout the gland and help digestion. Most pancreatic cancers start in the exocrine cells. Endocrine cell cancers are spread slower and are usually able to be treated easily. Unfortunately, early cancers are often misdiagnosed as simple digestive complaints, allowing the cancer to spread to nearby tissues and other organs and eventually into the bloodstream.

Like many other cancers, pancreatic cancer is characteristically a disease of the elderly.

### **Causes**

The main risk factors are -

- aging
- smoking is the main risk factor for pancreatic cancer; a smoker is three times more likely than a non smoker to acquire the disease.
- exposure to certain petroleum products may also increase risk.
- Excessive dietary fat and protein may promote the disease.
- Diabetes is also linked to pancreatic cancer.
- hereditary pancreatitis.
- Gardner's syndrome
- neurofibromatosis
- and multiple endocrine

### **Traditional Treatments**

See Cancer for more information about the treatments mentioned below.

Because most cases of pancreatic cancer are advanced when diagnosed, cure is rarely a realistic goal.

Treatment usually aims to extend survival and relieve uncomfortable symptoms. Surgery is only an option if the cancer has not spread beyond the pancreas.

Other options for patients are radiation or chemotherapy treatments, and medication to help control the pain.

### **Prevention**

- Avoid smoking
- Avoid working around petroleum products.

### **When to seek further professional advice**

- any symptoms, listed in the above section.