

Pancreatic Cancer: Risk Factors



What is a risk factor?

A risk factor is anything that may increase your chance of having a disease. Risk factors for a certain type of cancer might include smoking, diet, family history, or many other things. The exact cause of someone's cancer may not be known. But risk factors can make it more likely for a person to have cancer.

Things you should know about risk factors for cancer:

- Risk factors can increase a person's risk, but they don't always cause the disease.
- Some people with risk factors never develop cancer. Other people with cancer have no known risk factors.
- Some risk factors are very well known. But there's ongoing research about risk factors for many types of cancer.

Some risk factors, such as family history, may not be in your control. But others may be things you can change. Knowing the risk factors can help you make choices that might lower your risk. For instance, if an unhealthy diet is a risk factor, you may choose to eat healthy foods. If excess weight is a risk factor, you may decide to try to lose weight.

Who is at risk for pancreatic cancer?

Anyone can get pancreatic cancer. But there are some factors that can increase your risk, such as:

- **Older age.** Your risk of pancreatic cancer goes up as you get older. Pancreatic cancer is rare before age 45. Most people are 65 or older when they're diagnosed.
- **Gender.** Men are more likely to get pancreatic cancer than women.
- **Race.** African Americans and people of Ashkenazi Jewish descent are slightly more likely to get pancreatic cancer than people of other races.
- **Tobacco use.** The use of any type of tobacco (including chewing tobacco) increases your risk of this cancer.
- **Obesity.** People who are overweight or obese have a higher risk of having and dying from pancreatic cancer.
- **Diabetes.** People with long-term diabetes, especially type 2 diabetes, are at increased risk for this cancer.
- **Chronic pancreatitis.** Long-term inflammation of the pancreas is linked with a higher risk of pancreatic cancer.
- **Cirrhosis.** Scarring of the liver increases your risk. This can result from liver damage due to hepatitis or heavy alcohol use.
- **Family history.** People with family members who have had pancreatic cancer are at higher risk. Still, most people with pancreatic cancer do not have a family history of the disease.
- **Certain inherited genetic syndromes.** Certain rare, inherited syndromes are linked to gene changes that are passed on in families. Some of these can increase the risk of this cancer, including Lynch syndrome, hereditary pancreatitis, and Peutz-Jeghers syndrome. They also include hereditary breast and ovarian cancer syndrome and familial atypical multiple mole melanoma and others.

- **Helicobacter pylori infection.** This is a type of bacteria that can infect your stomach and cause ulcers. It also seems to increase the risk of pancreatic cancer.
- **Exposure to certain chemicals, especially in the workplace.** People who are exposed to certain chemicals at work, like certain dyes, pesticides, dry-cleaning products, and benzene, might have a higher risk of pancreatic cancer.

Other factors might affect pancreatic cancer risk. These include eating an unhealthy diet, not being physically active, and heavy alcohol use. Research on these and other risk factors is in progress.

What are your risk factors?

Talk with your healthcare provider about your risk factors for pancreatic cancer. Ask what you can do about them. Some risk factors, like your age, are not under your control. But there are some things you can do that might help lower your risk:

- Do not use any form of tobacco. If you do, try to quit. Your healthcare provider can help you.
- Stay away from alcohol. If you choose to drink alcohol, limit how much you drink to no more than 1 drink per day for women and 2 per day for men.
- Reach and stay at a healthy weight. Eating a healthy diet and staying active can help.
- Stay away from exposure to chemicals that might increase your risk. If you work with chemicals, use protective gear.

Should you be screened for pancreatic cancer?

Screening is the process of looking for disease in people who don't have symptoms. Screening for pancreatic cancer in the general population is not recommended by any major medical group in the U.S. at this time. Still, if you have a strong family history of pancreatic cancer, you might want to talk with your healthcare provider about screening. Or you can ask about genetic counseling and testing to help see if you are at higher risk. Some people at increased risk might benefit from screening.

If your healthcare provider thinks screening might be helpful, an endoscopic ultrasound might be done. This test uses a thin tube called an endoscope with a tiny ultrasound probe on the end. The scope is passed down your throat, through your stomach, and into the first part of your small intestine. A computer uses the sound waves from the probe to make pictures of your pancreas on a screen. If a tumor is seen, a small, hollow needle can be passed through the scope to take small pieces of it for testing. This is called a biopsy. Your healthcare provider can also use other imaging scans, such as an MRI, to check for pancreatic cancer.

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