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Home Illnesses and conditions Cancer Cancer types in adults Pancreatic cancer Pancreatic cancer is caused by the abnormal and uncontrolled growth of cells in the pancreas – a large gland that’s part of the digestive system. Around half of all new cases are diagnosed in people aged 75 or over. It’s uncommon in people under 40 years of age. In the early stages, a tumour in the pancreas doesn’t usually cause any symptoms, which can make it difficult to diagnose. It’s important to remember that these symptoms can be caused by many different conditions, and aren’t usually the result of cancer. But you should contact your GP if you’re concerned, or if these symptoms start suddenly. The first noticeable symptoms of pancreatic cancer are often: Other possible symptoms of pancreatic cancer include: You may also develop symptoms of diabetes if you have pancreatic cancer, because it can produce chemicals that interfere with the normal effect of insulin. There are also a number of different endocrine tumours that cause different symptoms, depending on the hormone the tumour produces. It’s not fully understood what causes pancreatic cancer, but a number of risk factors for developing the condition have been identified. Risk factors for pancreatic cancer include: In about 1 in 10 cases, pancreatic cancer is inherited from a person’s parents. Certain genes also increase your chances of getting pancreatitis, which in turn increases your risk of developing cancer of the pancreas. Cancer Research UK has more information on risk factors and causes on their website Your GP will first ask about your general health and carry out a physical examination. They may examine your tummy (abdomen) for a lump and to see whether your liver is enlarged. They’ll also check your skin and eyes for signs of jaundice and may request a urine sample and blood test. If your GP suspects pancreatic cancer, you’ll usually be referred to a specialist at a hospital for further investigation. You may have either: Depending on the results of a scan, further tests may include: A biopsy, where a small sample is taken from a suspected tumour, may also be carried out during these procedures. In 2015, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) published guidelines to help GPs recognise the signs and symptoms of pancreatic cancer and refer people for the right tests faster. To find out if you should be referred for further tests for suspected pancreatic cancer, read the NICE 2015 guidelines on Suspected Cancer: Recognition and Referral. Cancer of the pancreas is difficult to treat. It rarely causes any symptoms in the early stages, so it’s often not detected until the cancer is fairly advanced. If the tumour is large, treating the cancer will be more difficult. If you’ve been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, your treatment will depend on the type and location of your cancer, and how far it’s advanced. Your age, general health and personal preferences will also be taken into consideration.