What are pancreatic enzyme supplements and how can they help?

Pancreatic cancer or the removal of all or part of the pancreas through surgery can affect the ability of the pancreas to produce enzymes which help to break down fat, protein and carbohydrate. Lipase is responsible for the digestion of fat, protease is responsible for the digestion of proteins and amylase is responsible for the digestion of carbohydrate.

If you are experiencing weight loss, steatorrhoea, diarrhoea, abdominal discomfort, bloating or flatulence it can be a sign that you are not digesting and absorbing nutrients properly. These symptoms can often be controlled by the use of pancreatic enzyme supplements which help to break down food. There are different types of enzyme supplement available; Creon is the most commonly used type in the UK. Other types include Pancrease, Nutrizym, and Pancrex. Your consultant will usually prescribe the pancreatic enzyme supplements but your dietitian can also provide advice on starting to use these enzymes or altering the dose. The dosage prescribed will vary between individuals due to differences in pancreatic function. You may also be advised to alter the amount you take based on the size of the meal or whether it contains a lot of fat. Larger meals and more fatty foods need more enzymes to be digested and you should alter your pancreatic enzyme dose accordingly.

Your dietitian can provide advice on how to work out the best dosage of enzymes for you. When you first start taking the enzymes you may need to alter the amount you take until you find out what works best. Signs that you are taking enough include stools returning to normal, weight gain, and less gas/wind. Some people find they have to restrict the amount of fat in their diet despite taking the tablets. If you continue to have dietary related symptoms while using the enzyme supplements or are losing weight you should consult your dietitian.

How should I take the enzyme supplements?

It is important to understand how to take the supplements to make sure they work well. Pancreatic enzyme supplements come in a capsule form or as granules. They should be swallowed with water whenever you have a meal or snack and you should take the supplements immediately before you eat. For larger meals you can take half of the capsules just before you eat and half during the meal. It is best not to drink a whole glass of water with the tablets as this will flush them through your system too fast and it can make you feel full quicker.

Fatty foods may require more enzymes, for example fried foods, curries, doughnuts, pastries, puddings, oily dressings and sauces.

You should not take the supplements without food as they will not have a helpful effect and could be harmful. The capsules should not be chewed or crushed as this will destroy the enzymes. Ideally the capsules should be swallowed whole. However, if you find this difficult you can empty the capsules and take the microspheres they contain with a teaspoon of jam, but again you must not chew.

Some people experience bloating when taking an enzyme supplement. It can help to try a different brand of the enzyme as the manufacturers use different coatings or you can try a different type of enzyme. If you are experiencing problems seek advice from your dietitian, healthcare team or GP.

Nutritional supplements

If you have lost weight, have a poor appetite or can only eat small amounts of food you may find it helpful to take a nutritional supplement. These supplements can help make sure you are getting enough calories, protein, vitamins and minerals. They are available on prescription through your GP, hospital or dietitian.

There are different types of nutritional supplement products available including milk-based, juice-tasting, powder, yogurt style and soups. You may need to try different products until you find one you prefer or tolerate better. Some people find they prefer a savoury to a sweet product.

There are four main companies that make nutritional supplements. They are:

Abbott Nutrition (Ensure® range of productse.g. Ensure®Plus milkshake style, Ensure Plus Juice).

Nutricia (Forti range of products e.g. Fortisip, Fortijuice).

Fresenius (Fresubin range of products e.g. Fresubin Energy Drink).

Nestle (Resource range of products e.g. Resource Shake, Complan, Build-up)

Macmillan Cancer Support has more detailed information on the products produced by these companies on their website. You may want to try products from different companies to find one you like. The company websites also contain tips on using the products in recipes.

If you are finding it hard to eat or drink you may find it easier to take a nutritional supplement drink as small 'shots' (50ml doses) throughout the day.

If you are diabetic you should be aware that these supplements can be high in sugar (in particular glucose). This does not mean you cannot use them as it is important to get enough calories but you should seek advice from your dietitian before taking them and you may need to monitor your blood sugar closely.