Let's Talk About...

Pancreatitis

What is pancreatitis?

Pancreatitis (pan-cree-ah-TIE-tuss) is when the pancreas becomes irritated, inflamed, and does not work properly. The pancreas is an organ in the belly that helps the body digest food. The pancreas makes two enzymes, amylase (AM-ill-ace) and lipase (LIE-pace). These enzymes are special chemicals that flow into the intestines and help break down (digest) food. The food can then nourish the body. Normally these enzymes work and digest only after they leave the pancreas. In patients with pancreatitis, the enzymes start to work while they are still in the pancreas. As a result, they start to break down the pancreas.

Pancreatitis can be caused by trauma (like a blow or hit) to the pancreas. It can also be due a plugged pancreatic duct. The pancreatic duct is a little tube that lets the chemicals made by the pancreas flow into the intestines. An infection in the body can also cause pancreatitis. Pancreatitis often occurs in children during or soon after a severe illness or infection.

What are the symptoms of pancreatitis?

The most common symptom of pancreatitis is pain. This pain usually starts or gets worse after eating. The pain may come on suddenly or may increase slowly. Most children have severe pain with pancreatitis and feel very sick. Other symptoms of pancreatitis may include: nausea (feel like you are going to throw up), vomiting, fever, chills, a tender stomach, being tired, being irritable, or feeling like your heart is racing.

How is pancreatitis diagnosed?

Usually pancreatitis is diagnosed with a blood test. This is done by inserting a small needle into a vein and taking a small amount of blood. The blood test measures the blood levels of two enzymes made by the pancreas (amylase and lipase). Children with pancreatitis have much more of these two enzymes in their blood than normal. Sometimes a doctor may request that a special picture be taken of the pancreas. These pictures may be taken with a test called a CT scan or another test called an ultrasound. These tests are not painful.

How is pancreatitis treated?

Pancreatitis treatment often involves changing a child's diet to avoid certain foods. It can also include giving fluid in an IV (a tiny, flexible tube inserted into a vein) and controlling pain. In order to allow your child's pancreas to heal, the pancreas may need to rest from digestion. Your child may need some diet changes. The type of diet change usually depends on how bad the pancreatitis is. Your child may have to have small, bland meals, or she may not be able to eat anything at all. It is important for your child to follow her special diet while she is in the hospital. She may have to have a tube placed to remove stomach fluids and keep the stomach empty. This is a small tube placed through the nose into the stomach. This usually provides relief and completely rests the digestive tract.

If your child cannot eat for an extended period, she may receive nutrition with special IV fluid in an IV called a peripherally inserted central catheter (PICC) line (see ***Let's Talk About…Central line care, peripheral (PICC)***). This special IV fluid is called total parenteral nutrition (TPN) (see ***Let's Talk about…Parenteral nutrition***). This way, she can receive all the nutrition she needs and also let her pancreas rest and heal.

Because children with pancreatitis may have pain, it is important that the pain be well controlled while

your child is in the hospital. Pain control is usually achieved by using IV medicine. If your child is nauseated, IV medicine can help as well.

Are there complications?

After being treated, pancreatitis usually does not come back. Pancreatitis usually does not become a lasting problem and there are usually no complications.

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