

# Pancreatitis

## What is pancreatitis?

**Pancreatitis** [pan-kree-uh-TAHY-tis] is a condition in which the pancreas is irritated or inflamed (swollen). The **pancreas** is an organ in the upper abdomen (belly) that makes important chemicals for your body. There are different types of pancreatitis:

- **Acute** (short-term) **pancreatitis** comes on fast and lasts for a few days. Most people get better quickly without long-term problems, but serious cases can cause life-threatening problems. Repeated problems with acute pancreatitis can also damage the pancreas and lead to chronic pancreatitis.
- **Chronic** (long-term) **pancreatitis** does not heal, but gets worse over time. It can lead to other issues such as digestion problems and diabetes.

## What causes it?

Pancreatitis is most often caused by:

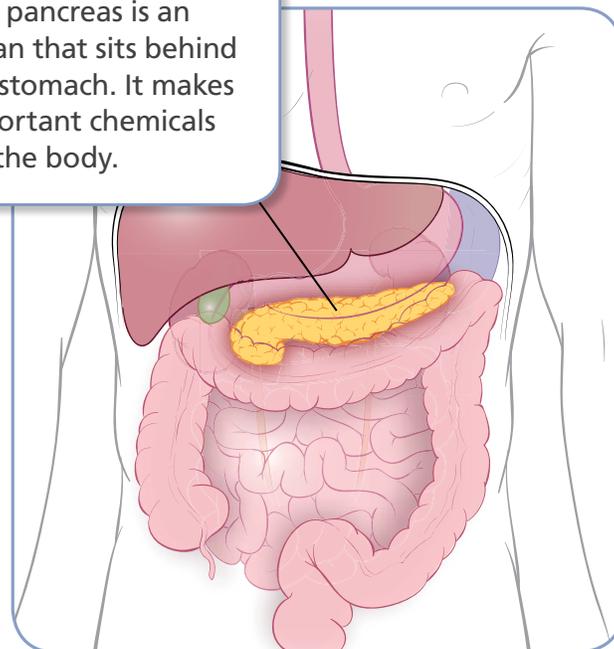
- **Gallstones.** Gallstones are hard lumps that form inside the gallbladder, an organ near the pancreas. The pancreas and the gallbladder drain into the same tube. If the gallbladder is blocked, then fluids from the pancreas can also get backed up and cause pain.
- **Alcohol abuse.** People who drink too much alcohol for a long time can get alcohol-related pancreatitis. Symptoms often occur 1 to 3 days after binge drinking or after suddenly stopping drinking.

Less often, pancreatitis can be caused by:

- Abdominal surgery
- Certain medicines
- Injury or infection in the abdomen
- Cigarette smoking
- Problems with your blood
- Genetic problems like cystic fibrosis

In about 1 in 5 patients with acute pancreatitis, no cause can be identified.

The pancreas is an organ that sits behind the stomach. It makes important chemicals for the body.



## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of pancreatitis may depend on which type you have. Acute pancreatitis can have these symptoms:

- Sudden, constant pain in the upper abdomen. You may also feel it in your shoulder and back, and it may hurt more after eating.
- Nausea or vomiting.
- Rapid heartbeat.
- In severe cases, symptoms can include dehydration (loss of water from the body), low blood pressure, or failure of the heart, lungs, or kidneys. Bleeding in the pancreas can cause shock or death.

Chronic pancreatitis can have the above symptoms plus these:

- Indigestion
- Unexplained weight loss
- Diarrhea
- Greasy stool (poop)

## How does my doctor know I have it?

To find out if pancreatitis is the cause of your symptoms, your doctor will do a physical exam, ask about your medical history, and do a blood test. You may also have an imaging test like an x-ray, ultrasound, CT scan, or MRI of your abdomen.

Once the doctor knows you have pancreatitis, other tests can help find out what caused it. This will help make sure you get the right treatment.

## How is it treated?

Pancreatitis is usually treated in the hospital. If your pancreatitis is severe, you may be treated in an intensive care unit. Your treatment in the hospital may include:

- Fasting** — you may need to stop eating while your pancreas heals.
- IV (intravenous) fluids** to prevent dehydration.
- Medicines** to control pain and nausea.
- Antibiotic medicines** to treat or prevent infection.
- A feeding tube.** If you have chronic pancreatitis, you may need to wear a feeding tube for several weeks.

Your doctors will also treat the cause of your pancreatitis to help prevent it from coming back. Your treatment may include:

- Procedures to prevent gallstones.** If your pancreatitis is caused by gallstones, a procedure called ERCP can be used to treat the cause.
- Surgery to remove your gallbladder.**
- Surgery to drain fluid** from your pancreas or to remove damaged or infected tissue.
- Treatment for alcohol dependence.** Your doctor may recommend you enter a treatment program. Continuing to drink alcohol can lead to serious health problems.
- Changes to your diet.** Before you leave the hospital, you may meet with a dietitian to help make a meal plan.

## What other problems can pancreatitis cause?

Acute pancreatitis can cause these problems:

- Kidney failure
- Breathing problems
- Infection
- Chronic pancreatitis

Chronic pancreatitis can cause these problems:

- Severe abdominal pain
- Malnutrition, diarrhea, and weight loss
- Diabetes
- Cancer of the pancreas

## How can I keep from getting pancreatitis again?

Changes to your lifestyle can reduce your chances of getting pancreatitis again. These are:

- Stop drinking alcohol.** If you need to, enter a treatment program to stop drinking.
- Quit tobacco.** If you use tobacco, join a program to help you quit. It's easier with a program than on your own.
- Eat a healthy, low-fat diet.** Eating smaller meals often, instead of big meals, will put less stress on your pancreas.
- Drink plenty of water,** and limit drinks with caffeine like sodas, coffee, tea, and energy drinks. Pancreatitis can cause dehydration.
- Live a healthy lifestyle.** This means staying at a healthy weight, eating a balanced diet, and getting regular exercise.

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