

# Pancreatitis

Pancreatitis happens when the pancreas gets irritated or inflamed. The pancreas is a large organ behind the stomach that works to help digest the foods we eat and to control the body's blood sugar. The pancreas helps to digest foods from enzymes that break up proteins, carbohydrates and fats. These enzymes enter the small intestines through the pancreatic duct.

When there is blockage or swelling in the pancreas, enzymes are not able to move through the pancreatic duct for food digestion. Instead, the enzymes attack the pancreas.

## Signs

Pain is the most common sign of the condition. Pain may start quickly and move from front to back or get worse after eating. You may have:

- Severe pain in the stomach or upper abdomen
- Tenderness or swelling in the abdomen
- Back pain
- Nausea or vomiting
- Stools that are oily or foul smelling

## Types of Pancreatitis

There are two types of pancreatitis: acute and chronic.

- **Acute** pancreatitis may last a few days to several weeks. It can be very serious. It is often caused by **gallstones, gallbladder disease or problems from a test called Endoscopic Retrograde Cholangiopancreatography (ERCP)**. This test is used to remove gallstones or study the gallbladder, liver or pancreas.

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- ▶ Acute conditions can also be caused by alcohol abuse, trauma, infection, high levels of fat or calcium in the blood, or a rare side effect of some prescribed medicines.
- **Chronic** pancreatitis develops from more than one attack of acute pancreatitis, and is the result of continued irritation. Most cases last at least 6 months. Enzymes can attack and damage the pancreas.
  - ▶ There may be problems with digestion and absorption of nutrients. Weight loss may occur. Some people may develop diabetes from changes to insulin production in the body.
  - ▶ If the condition gets worse, the body may decrease or stop making enzymes to digest food. Pain may decrease when this happens as the enzymes are no longer attacking the pancreas.

## Testing

After a physical exam, you may have these tests:

- Blood tests are used check the levels of pancreas enzymes, lipase and amylase. Fat and calcium levels in the blood will also be checked.
- Stool or urine samples.
- Computerized Tomography (CT) Scan may be used to check the health of soft tissue and organs in the abdomen.
- Other tests, such as an abdominal ultrasound or endoscopic ultrasound, or ERCP may be done (if this was not a cause of the condition) to check your gallbladder, pancreas and liver.

## Treatment

### Acute:

- Drink fluids that are low in sugar, such as water. Eat only bland foods. If you are not able to drink fluids, you may need to come to the hospital. Fluids will be given through a tube into your vein (intravenous or IV fluids).
- Take pain medicine as directed by your doctor.
- You may be given pills of digestive enzymes to help your pancreas work.
- **Do not smoke or drink alcohol.**

**Chronic:**

Treatment is not a cure, but manages the condition. If treatment is not given, it can harm the pancreas or other organs if enzymes enter the blood stream. This can lead to digestive bleeding, infection and pockets of fluid in the intestines called cysts.

- You may not be able to eat or drink fluids at first so your pancreas can rest and heal. Fluids will be given through a tube into your vein (IV).
- Antibiotics may be given to fight or prevent infection.
- You may have nutrition through the IV or a feeding tube. Nutrition may be called TPN or Total Parenteral Nutrition. Once your pancreas has rested, clear liquids will be started. A low fat diet will be started as digestion improves.
- You may be given digestive enzymes to help your pancreas work.
- To reduce stress on the pancreas
  - ▶ Eat a high protein, high carbohydrate and low fat diet.
  - ▶ Eat 5 to 6 small meals a day instead of 3 larger meals.
  - ▶ Avoid spicy foods or gas-producing foods, such as broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, cucumbers, and beans/legumes. For more information, read the handout, [Dietary Guidelines for Controlling Abdominal Gas](#).
  - ▶ Limit caffeine.
- If you have high blood sugar, limit sugar in the diet.
- Surgery may be needed if gallbladder disease, gallstones or other bowel problems do not improve.
- **Do not drink alcohol or use tobacco products.** Even small amounts of these products can cause an attack. Get help to quit tobacco and alcohol use.

✦ **Talk to your doctor or others on your health care team if you have any questions. You may request more written information from the Library for Health Information at (614) 293-3707 or email: [health-info@osu.edu](mailto:health-info@osu.edu).**