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Early Detection Is Important

Diane's Seeds for Hope (Is a 501 (c) 3 Non-Profit)

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This information was copied with permission from the Pancreatic Cancer Action Network (PanCAN), a national non-profit organization dedicated to fighting pancreatic cancer in a comprehensive way through research, patient services, advocacy, and community engagement.

Can Pancreatic Cancer Be Caught Early?

Pancreatic cancer is hard to diagnose early. There is no standard diagnostic tool or established early detection method for pancreatic cancer in the general population yet. However, there are imaging and blood-based tests that may be able to detect pancreatic cancer in its early stages in people who are at an increased risk for the disease.

Early-stage pancreatic cancer is usually found if the location of the cancer causes symptoms early or if testing for unrelated medical conditions shows signs of the disease. But most pancreatic cancer patients are diagnosed when the cancer is already in its later stages and when the cancer has already metastasized (or spread outside of the pancreas) at stage IV.

Researchers across the world are working to develop early detection methods for pancreatic cancer. Those at high risk may consider research studies like surveillance programs. These programs use regular monitoring to look for the disease with the hope of finding it earlier if it does develop.

Why Is Early Detection Important?

Patients whose disease is diagnosed in its early stages have better outcomes. This is due to access to more treatment options, including surgery. For eligible patients, surgery is the best option for long-term survival of pancreatic cancer. It can increase a patient's survival by about ten-fold. But most patients are diagnosed at later stages and cannot have surgery. In addition, although 15-20% of pancreatic cancer patients may be eligible for surgery, data shows that up to half of those patients are told they are ineligible. The Pancreatic Cancer Action Network (PanCAN) strongly recommends that patients see a surgeon who performs a high volume of pancreatic surgeries (more than 15 per year) to determine eligibility.

Ways to find pancreatic cancer in the earliest stages are urgently needed. PanCAN and other advocacy organizations and the scientific community are working to find pancreatic cancer earlier through:

- Awareness of symptoms
- Improve imaging
- Studies focused on biomarkers (biological clues) that could help doctors diagnose, monitor, and treat the disease
- Improve how people at high risk are found and monitored

Why Is Pancreatic Cancer Difficult to Find Early?

- The pancreas is deep in the abdomen. Doctors usually cannot see or feel the tumor during a physical exam.
- Pancreatic cancer symptoms are not always obvious and usually develop over time.
- Tests used to diagnose pancreatic cancer do not always detect small lesions, pre-cancers, or early-stage cancers.
- Researchers have had a hard time figuring out which people to screen. Broad screening can cause medical, emotional, and financial challenges.
- Doctors use several tests to diagnosis pancreatic cancer, but there is no standard, single test.

Who Is at High Risk for Pancreatic Cancer?

Family history is a pancreatic cancer risk factor. Individuals who are first-degree relatives of someone diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, may have an increased risk of developing pancreatic cancer. Individuals with pancreatic cancer are strongly recommended to undergo genetic testing for inherited mutation. The risk increases if more family members are affected with pancreatic cancer or other specific cancers or conditions, including:

- Familial breast, ovarian or colon cancer
- Familial melanoma
- Hereditary pancreatitis
- Inherited genetic syndromes associated with pancreatic cancer

The following factors also increase pancreatic cancer risk:

- Long-standing diabetes
- Chronic and hereditary pancreatitis
- Smoking
- Race (ethnicity): African-American or Ashkenazi Jew
- Age: over the age 60
- Diets high in red and processed meats
- Obesity

What is Genetic Testing?

Genetic testing looks for inherited mutations. If someone thinks they may be at risk for pancreatic cancer, they should talk to their doctor or genetic counselor. These healthcare providers can provide information on genetic testing and help figure out which tests may be appropriate.

What Early Detection Methods Exist for Pancreatic Cancer?

Today, pancreatic cancer early detection or screening methods focus on those at high risk. These options include:

- Surveillance programs
- Regular imaging scans
- Blood-based tests

What Kind of Pancreatic Screening Services Are Available?

No universal screening tests for pancreatic cancer in the general population exist yet. But researchers across the country are studying people who have a high chance of getting pancreatic cancer. Methods to detect cancer in people at increased risk are especially important. Experts do not know yet when, how or how often high-risk people should be tested. They recommend taking part in studies looking at groups at high risk for pancreatic cancer, these are also known as surveillance studies. Surveillance studies throughout the country enroll people at high risk. In these programs, doctors check participants for changes in the pancreas. People at high risk who cannot take part in a surveillance program may get regular imaging scans from a gastroenterologist who specializes in pancreatic cancer. The healthcare team can also order a blood test that may be able to detect the presence of pancreatic cancer before symptoms arise.

What are Surveillance Programs?

In a surveillance, early detection or screening program, doctors actively check people who are at risk of getting pancreatic cancer. The goal is to find pancreatic cancer and pre-cancerous lesions earlier in those who develop the disease. Without screening programs, people who develop pancreatic cancer may be diagnosed at a later stage. Surveillance programs usually use imaging tests to monitor patients. They may also test blood or pancreatic fluids. Current pancreatic cancer surveillance programs study people at high risk due to family history, an inherited genetic mutation, new onset diabetes or chronic pancreatitis. Before joining a surveillance program, individuals should understand the risks and benefits. The healthcare professionals running the program can help with this.

Benefits of taking part in a surveillance program include:

- Knowledgeable doctors monitoring patients
- Possibly receiving new and better diagnostic tests
- Helping advance early detection efforts

What are biomarkers?

A biomarker is a substance found in the body that can be measured. The amount of a biomarker may differ between a healthy person and someone with a disease. This means biomarkers may aid in detecting that disease. Biomarkers may be found in samples of blood, tissue (from a biopsy), urine, saliva, or other substances in the body. There are blood tests commercially available that can detect pancreatic exocrine tumors, the most common pancreatic tumor type. The blood tests may detect DNA released from cancer cells, the immune system's response to the tumor or other blood-based biomarkers, like CA 19-9. While blood tests may signify the possible presence of the disease, they cannot lead to a definitive pancreatic cancer diagnosis. Additional tests, like imaging and biopsies, are necessary to confirm the diagnosis.

What Are the Early Warning Signs of Pancreatic Cancer?

Early pancreatic cancer may cause only vague, unexplained symptoms, such as:

- Pain, usually in the abdomen or back
- Weight loss
- Jaundice (yellowing of the skin, eyes or both) with or without itching
- Appetite loss
- Nausea
- Changes in stool
- Pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas)
- Recent-onset diabetes
- Fatigue
- Weakness
- Depression

What Research is Currently Taking Place for the Early Detection of Pancreatic Cancer?

Early detection is critical to improve pancreatic cancer outcomes. Many scientists focus their pancreatic cancer research on early detection. Promising pancreatic cancer early detection projects are underway, including research funded by PanCAN grants. Also, PanCAN's Early Detection Initiative is studying the relationship between new-onset diabetes and pancreatic cancer.

Contact PanCAN Patient Services for information and support: 877-2-PANCAN or patientservices@pancan.org