

## What is pancreatic cancer?

This fact sheet explains the pancreas and what it does. It also explains what pancreatic cancer is. If you are at all worried about pancreatic cancer, speak to your doctor.

You can also speak to our specialist nurses on our Support Line about any questions you have about pancreatic cancer. You can call them free on 0808 801 0707, or email [support@pancreaticcancer.org.uk](mailto:support@pancreaticcancer.org.uk)

You can read more about the symptoms of pancreatic cancer on our website at [pancreaticcancer.org.uk/symptoms](http://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/symptoms)

### What is the pancreas?

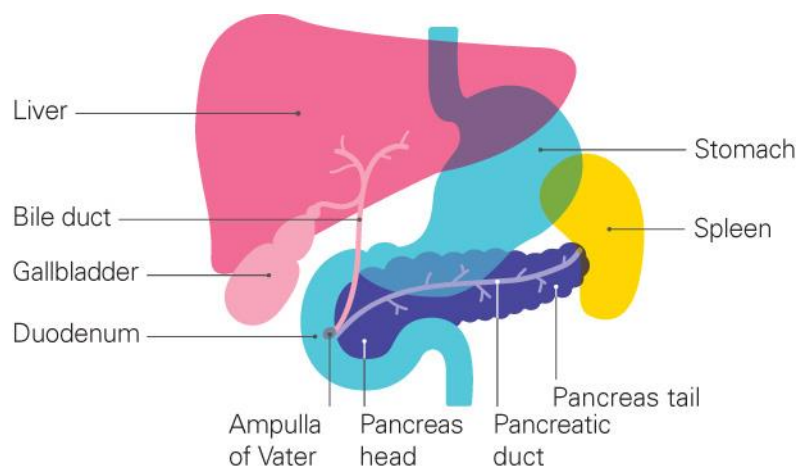
The pancreas is a large gland that lies behind the stomach, at the back of the tummy area (abdomen) – at about the same height as the bottom of the breastbone. It is about 15cm (6 inches) long and shaped a bit like a tadpole. It is often described as having a head, body and tail.

The pancreas is surrounded by several large and important organs and blood vessels.

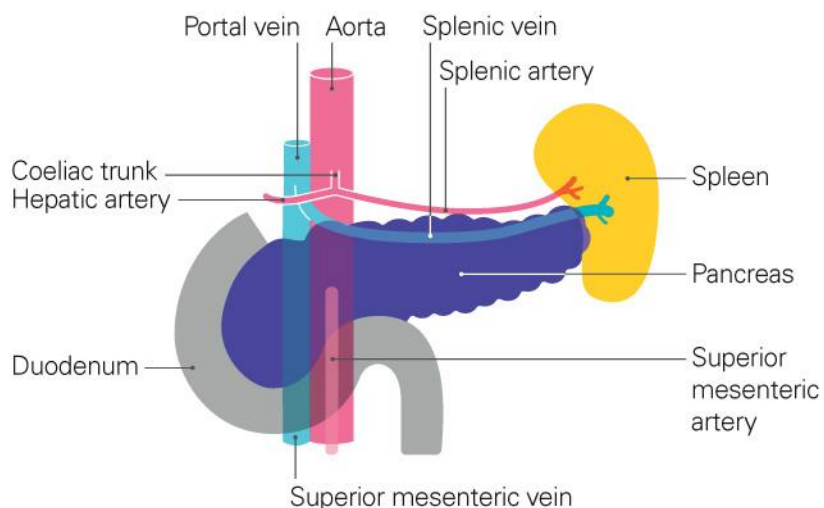
- The head of the pancreas is next to the duodenum (first part of the small intestines). The body of the pancreas is the middle section, and the tail is next to the spleen.
- The liver, stomach, intestines, left kidney and gallbladder are also all close to the pancreas.
- The blood vessels that carry blood to the liver, intestines, kidneys and lower part of the body are very close to the pancreas, and may touch it.

- The pancreatic duct runs the length of the pancreas. It carries pancreatic juices, which contain enzymes made by the pancreas (see page 3), to the duodenum.
- The pancreatic duct and bile duct (which carries a fluid called bile from the liver) both open into the duodenum at the ampulla of Vater.

### Diagram of the pancreas and surrounding organs



### Diagram of the pancreas and surrounding blood vessels



The pancreas has two main functions.

- It makes enzymes, which help to break down (digest) food. The cells that produce enzymes are called exocrine cells.
- It makes hormones, including insulin, which control the level of sugar in the blood (blood sugar level). The cells that produce hormones are called endocrine cells.

Both of these functions can be affected if the pancreas isn't working properly – for example, because of pancreatic cancer.

## What is pancreatic cancer?

Normal healthy cells grow in a carefully controlled way. Pancreatic cancer develops when cells in the pancreas grow out of control, forming a tumour (a lump or growth). This can happen in the head, body or tail of the pancreas.

Pancreatic cancers are divided into two main groups.

- Exocrine cancers start in the exocrine cells. These cells make enzymes. About 95 out of 100 pancreatic cancers (95%) are exocrine tumours.
- Endocrine cancers (also called neuroendocrine tumours or NETs) start in endocrine cells. These cells produce hormones. Less than 5 in 100 (5%) of all pancreatic cancers are neuroendocrine tumours.

The most common type of pancreatic cancer is pancreatic ductal adenocarcinoma.

Read more about pancreatic ductal adenocarcinoma on our website at [pancreaticcancer.org.uk/types](https://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/types)

Pancreatic cancer can grow anywhere in the pancreas.

- Most pancreatic cancers are in the head of the pancreas – about 60 to 70 out of 100 cancers (60-70%).
- About 20 to 25 out of 100 pancreatic cancers (20-25%) are in the body and tail of the pancreas.
- About 10 to 20 out of 100 (10-20%) are spread throughout the pancreas.

Exocrine and neuroendocrine cancers behave differently and are treated differently. And there are different types of exocrine and neuroendocrine cancers.

Speak to our specialist nurses on our free Support Line  
**0808 801 0707**  
[support@pancreaticcancer.org.uk](mailto:support@pancreaticcancer.org.uk)

Read more about the different types of pancreatic cancer on our website at [\*\*pancreaticcancer.org.uk/types\*\*](https://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/types)

Most of the information on our website is about exocrine cancers. The NET Patient Foundation has more information about neuroendocrine tumours.

Find out more about the symptoms of pancreatic cancer on our website at [\*\*pancreaticcancer.org.uk/symptoms\*\*](https://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/symptoms).

You can also read about how pancreatic cancer is diagnosed at [\*\*pancreaticcancer.org.uk/diagnosis\*\*](https://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/diagnosis)

If you have any questions or concerns about pancreatic cancer, speak to your doctor.

You can also speak to our specialist nurses on our Support Line with any questions about pancreatic cancer.

## Pancreatic Cancer UK services

### Our Support Line

Our Support Line is a lifeline for thousands of patients, families and friends. Our specialist nurses understand the issues you might be facing. They are there for you, giving you personalised information and support that you need, when you need it.

Call us free on **0808 801 0707** (Monday to Friday from 10am-4pm), or email us at **[support@pancreaticcancer.org.uk](mailto:support@pancreaticcancer.org.uk)**

### Our information

We have the most up-to-date information on everything you need to know about pancreatic cancer on our website. We can help you every step of the way, from explaining your diagnosis and treatment options, to managing symptoms, and questions to ask at your appointments.

### Go to **[pancreaticcancer.org.uk/informationandsupport](https://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/informationandsupport)**

Download or order our publications, for free, at **[pancreaticcancer.org.uk/publications](https://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/publications)**

### Our online community

Our online community is a supportive place where everyone affected by pancreatic cancer can be there for each other.

Find us now at **[forum.pancreaticcancer.org.uk](https://forum.pancreaticcancer.org.uk)**

### Support groups

We help set up local support groups in communities all across the UK. These groups provide the opportunity for sharing personal experiences, understanding and support.

Check to see if there's a group near you at **[pancreaticcancer.org.uk/supportgroups](https://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/supportgroups)**

## Useful organisations

### **Cancer Research UK**

[www.cancerresearchuk.org](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org)

**Helpline: 0808 800 4040** (Mon-Fri 9am-5pm)

Information for anyone affected by cancer.

### **Macmillan Cancer Support**

[www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

**Support Line: 0808 808 00 00** (Mon-Fri 9am-8pm)

Provides practical, medical and financial support for anyone affected by cancer.

### **NET Patient Foundation**

[www.netpatientfoundation.org](http://www.netpatientfoundation.org)

**Call free on 0800 434 6476**

Information and support for people with neuroendocrine tumours (NET).

Speak to our specialist nurses on our free Support Line  
**0808 801 0707**  
[support@pancreaticcancer.org.uk](mailto:support@pancreaticcancer.org.uk)

This fact sheet has been produced by the Support and Information Team at Pancreatic Cancer UK. It has been reviewed by health professionals and people affected by pancreatic cancer.

References to the sources of information used to write this fact sheet and a list of health professionals who reviewed it are available on our website – **[pancreaticcancer.org.uk](http://pancreaticcancer.org.uk)**

Pancreatic Cancer UK makes every effort to make sure that our services provide up-to-date, unbiased and accurate information about pancreatic cancer. We hope that this information will add to the medical advice you have received and help you to take part in decisions related to your treatment and care. This information should not replace information and advice from your medical team – please speak to your doctor, nurse or other members of your medical team about any questions or concerns.

### **Give us your feedback**

We hope you have found this information helpful. We are always keen to improve our information, so let us know if you have any comments or suggestions. Email us at **[publications@pancreaticcancer.org.uk](mailto:publications@pancreaticcancer.org.uk)** or write to the Information Manager at the address below.

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Review date June 2018

Pancreatic Cancer UK is registered as a charity in England & Wales (1112708) and Scotland (SC046392)



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