Symptom management for pancreatic cancer

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People with pancreatic cancer often have some symptoms and side effects. Many of these can be well controlled with the appropriate treatment such as medication or surgery.

You probably won’t experience all the common symptoms – your situation will depend on if you have an exocrine or neuroendocrine tumour and what kind of treatment you receive.

Discuss how you are feeling with your medical team. Your doctor may be able to prescribe medication or change your treatment to control your symptoms.

Fatigue

Fatigue means feeling very tired and lacking energy to do day-to-day things. It is the most common side effect associated with cancer treatment.

Fatigue for people with cancer is different from normal tiredness because the feeling of exhaustion doesn’t always go away with rest or sleep. Everyday tasks such as bathing, cleaning, shopping, eating and cooking may leave you feeling completely exhausted.

Even talking to those close to you can sometimes feel too tiring. It is not uncommon for people with pancreatic cancer to feel very tired a lot of the time.

If fatigue continues for a long period of time you may lose interest in things that you usually like doing or you may feel unable to concentrate for very long. It can affect how you feel about yourself and others which may impact on your close relationships.

If you are feeling low, talk to your doctor. You may be depressed which can make fatigue worse.

Many people with cancer don’t report fatigue to their doctor because they think that nothing can be done about it. However, your medical team can give you advice and helpful tips about managing your tiredness.

Feeling low or depressed

Many people feel low or depressed after a cancer diagnosis, during treatment or when they are recovering. Don’t be surprised if you feel unhappy at times.

Some people feel sad or depressed because of the changes that the cancer has caused. Others are frightened about the future.
There is a difference between feeling down and feeling depressed. You may be depressed if you are in a low mood for most of the time, or if your sadness lasts two weeks or more. A list of the symptoms of depression can be found at www.beyondblue.org.au

Depression won't go away by itself – you will need specific treatment. Being honest about how you feel will help your doctor give you advice about the type of support and care you need.

There are many effective treatments for depression including both medication and non-medication options such as counselling.

**Pain**

Although people feel pain in different areas and in different ways, pancreatic cancer, in general, can cause pain in the centre of the abdomen and in the middle part of the back.

Most pain can be well controlled with pain-relief tablets. Opioids - such as morphine - are very effective if taken at the correct dose. Side effects from opioids include nausea and constipation but these can be relieved with anti-nausea medications and laxatives. Other drugs that block nerve pain may also be useful.

If pain is severe or difficult to control you may have pain-relieving medication injected into the nerves of your back. This is known as a nerve block or celiac axis block.

You may be concerned about becoming addicted to pain-relieving medication. These drugs rarely cause addiction problems when taken at the appropriate dose for pain relief.

**Jaundice**

Bile is a yellow-green liquid produced by the liver that is important for breaking down fats during digestion. It is stored in the gall bladder and travels via the bile duct to the small bowel. If cancer presses on the bile duct, it can cause a blockage and prevent bile from passing into the small bowel. Bile then builds up in the bloodstream, causing symptoms of jaundice such as:

- yellowish skin and eyes
- itchy skin
- reduced appetite, poor digestion and weight loss
- dark urine and pale stools.

**Having a stent**

A stent by endoscope can relieve jaundice. A stent is a metal or plastic tube that is put into the blocked bile duct to hold it open so bile flows more freely.

The stent is inserted during a procedure known as an endoscopic retrograde cholangio-pancreatography (ERCP). An ERCP involves passing an endoscope into the bile duct via your mouth, stomach and duodenum. X-rays are used to position the stent across the blockage to keep it open. You will have sedation for the procedure. You can have an ERCP as an outpatient or you may stay in hospital for one or two days.

Jaundice usually disappears over two to three weeks but the itchy skin often goes away in three to four days. Your appetite will improve and you may gain some weight.

**Nutrition and dietary problems**

Nutrition can be a major focus for people diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Treatments such as surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy can affect your ability to eat, digest and absorb food.

This can lead to dietary problems including:

- poor digestion of fats and proteins (malabsorption) caused by a lack of digestive enzymes, that help break down food
- poor appetite
- weight loss
- diarrhoea
• nausea and/or vomiting
• diabetes.

You may find it helpful to talk to a dietitian as your needs may vary to those of other people with pancreatic cancer.

Dietitians are experts in nutrition who can give you specialist advice on how to cope with nutrition and eating problems. Dietitians are available in all public hospitals and some private hospitals. You can also see a dietitian in private practice. Ideally you should see a dietitian connected to your cancer centre. Ask your oncologist how to get in touch with one. The Dietitians Association of Australia can also help you locate an accredited practising dietitian in your area or one who has experience with a particular issue.

**Eating after Whipple’s procedure**

People with pancreatic cancer who have a Whipple’s procedure may have many questions and concerns about their diet following the operation.

The following suggestions may be helpful when you start to eat after Whipple’s surgery.

• avoid eating too many fatty, greasy or fried foods, or increase your pancreatic enzyme supplements when you have such foods.
• avoid eating too much of the foods that produce wind (gas) e.g. legumes (dried beans, peas or lentils) vegetables such as broccoli, brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower or asparagus, and carbonated (gassy) drinks.
• have small meals every two to three hours rather than three large meals.
• if you are not digesting and absorbing food properly (malabsorption), you will need a multivitamin supplement including extra calcium, folic acid, iron, vitamin B12 and the fat-soluble vitamins A, D, E and K. If you drink while eating, take small sips to avoid filling up too quickly.
• take the right amount of digestive enzyme supplements.
• talk to a dietitian or your doctor for more information about vitamin and enzyme supplements.

**Poor appetite and weight loss**

Many people with pancreatic cancer lose weight. Pancreatic cancer can prevent your body from absorbing food and it can also produce hormones that cause your body to break down your muscle and fat.

Cancer treatment may also affect your appetite or sense of taste and you may not absorb food efficiently. If you can’t manage to eat much or you are trying to gain or maintain your weight, there are ways to take in more energy (kilojoules/calories) without having to eat more food.

• eat small snacks frequently e.g. every two hours.
• have your biggest meal of the day when you are hungriest.
• view food as a form of therapy. Keep track of your meals and snacks.
• add extras to your basic foods at mealtimes. e.g. add milk powder to cereals, sauces, desserts, mashed vegetables, soup, drinks and egg dishes; add cheese to sauces, soup, vegetables, baked beans, casseroles, salads and egg dishes; add sugar, golden syrup, honey or glucose powder to cereal, fruit and drinks.
• use food-type nutrition supplements.
• relax low-cholesterol and other dietary restrictions.
• gaining weight or maintaining your weight is more important than avoiding extra amounts of fat and sugar.
• eat in a comfortable, relaxed place and make meals as enjoyable as possible.
• weigh yourself once or twice a week to see if your weight is stable.

**Changes in taste or smell**

Sometimes your sense of taste may change because of the effects of treatment. To compensate for the loss of taste, some people add sauces, spices and other condiments to make meals more appetising. Others find it more helpful to avoid strong flavours and eat bland, unseasoned food, such as rice, pasta, steamed vegetables and fruit.

Try different ideas to see what suits you best.
• add flavour with salt, garlic, cheese, bacon, herbs, marinades, chutneys, pickles, sauces, spices, sugar or chocolate.
• if food is too sweet, add salt, lemon juice or coffee powder – start with a few sprinkles then adjust to your taste.
• if food tastes metallic or salty, add sugar or honey or try sucking on tart-flavoured boiled lollies.
• marinate vegetables, meat or tofu to add extra flavour.
• choose cold food or food without a strong smell. Sometimes the smell of food can put you off eating.
• reheat meals in the microwave so the food smells don't put you off.
• use a drinking straw to bypass your tastebuds.
• if possible stay out of the kitchen when food is being prepared if cooking odours affect you.
• eat with plastic utensils to help reduce any bitter or metallic tastes. Don’t drink out of aluminium cans, pewter beer mugs or metallic containers.
• don’t force yourself to eat foods that you don’t enjoy.

Diarrhoea

With some cancer treatments the bowel may become irritated and sensitive, causing temporary changes to your bowel habits. Diarrhoea means your bowel motions are urgent, watery and frequent. You may also get abdominal cramping.

Diarrhoea may have several causes including chemotherapy, radiotherapy to the abdomen or pelvis, infection, food sensitivity, malabsorption and emotional upset.

Whatever the cause of diarrhoea a change of diet often helps particularly if you reduce your fibre intake temporarily.

Coping with diarrhoea

Foods to choose:
• soft, well-cooked, peeled vegetables and fruit
• white bread, white rice and pasta
• corn- or rice-based cereals
• lean meat, fish, chicken
• eggs and dairy products.

Foods to avoid:
• fruit and vegetable skins
• wholegrain bread
• bran- and muesli-based cereals
• nuts
• legumes such as lentils, peas and baked beans.

There are also medications available especially if the diarrhoea is caused by not having enough pancreatic enzymes. If you develop diarrhoea that lasts more than a couple of days or keeps recurring, or if it causes you discomfort or distress see your doctor or dietitian.

Tips for coping with diarrhoea:
• if the stools are pale in colour, float and are difficult to flush, it may be a sign that you do not have enough pancreatic enzymes (pancreatic enzyme insufficiency). Talk to your doctor about starting on enzyme replacement therapy or adjusting your dose.
• take anti-diarrhoea medication as prescribed by your doctor.
• drink plenty of liquids (e.g. water, fruit juices or weak cordials) to replace lost fluids.
• try to eat three small meals and three snacks every day.
• avoid fried or greasy foods.
• avoid alcohol and limit caffeine and spicy foods as these can worsen diarrhoea.
• some people develop a temporary intolerance to the sugar in milk (lactose) when they have diarrhoea. If this occurs try soy milk or lactose-reduced milk. Cheese and yoghurt in small amounts are usually okay.
Nausea and vomiting

Feeling sick (nausea) and vomiting may be brought on by treatment, food odours, gas in the stomach or bowel, or motion sickness. For some people just the thought of treatment makes them feel unwell.

Some cancers press on the duodenum and prevent food from leaving the stomach. This can cause persistent vomiting and rapid weight loss.

See your doctor if vomiting lasts for more than a day or if you can’t keep any fluids down and risk becoming dehydrated.

If you have persistent vomiting, the part of your body that connects your stomach to your small bowel may be blocked.

How to cope with vomiting

Stage 1 Small sips
For persistent vomiting, sip small amounts of liquid as often as you can. Try flat ginger beer/ale or lemonade, or suck on an ice-block.

Stage 2 Introduce drinks slowly
If your vomiting has stopped but you still feel sick, have small, frequent meals to stop feelings of hunger that can aggravate nausea. Start with cold drinks. A mixture of half milk (or skim milk) and half water (or soda water) may be surprisingly soothing. A spoonful of ice-cream in a glass of lemonade, diluted fruit drinks or jellies can also be satisfying. Later try warm drinks such as weak tea or clear soups (broth).

Stage 3 Introduce solid foods
Next try small amounts of solid foods such as plain biscuits or toast with honey or jam. Stewed fruits and yoghurt are also good.

Stage 4 Return to normal diet
As soon as you can increase your food intake until you are eating a normal, well-balanced diet. Limit rich foods such as meats or full-cream dairy products. Your doctor or dietitian may advise you to take additional nourishment (such as supplements) on your good days to make up for the days when you can’t eat properly.

Tips for coping with nausea:

- eat small meals often – not eating can make nausea worse.
- try snacks such as dry crackers or toast.
- eat and drink slowly. Chew food well.
- choose cold foods instead of hot, fried, greasy or spicy foods.
- avoid strong odours and cooking smells.
- suck boiled lollies with peppermint or lemon.
- try drinking ginger beer, ginger ale or ginger tea, or sucking on candied ginger.
- talk to your doctor about trying anti-nausea medication.

Diabetes

Some people develop diabetes before the pancreatic cancer is diagnosed or soon after surgery. Diabetes, or poorly controlled blood sugar levels, occurs because your pancreas may not be making enough insulin or the cancer is stopping the glucose from working. Symptoms of diabetes include blurry vision, excess thirst, frequent urination, hunger or weight loss.

The way diabetes is controlled varies from person to person but usually includes a combination of balancing your blood sugar levels and managing your diet. If needed you will have medication to control your blood sugar levels. Your doctor and a dietitian will tell you the best way to take care of yourself if you have diabetes.

Tips for managing diabetes:

- eat small meals and snacks regularly to help control blood sugar levels.
- if you are taking diabetes medication, you need to include carbohydrate foods at every meal to avoid low blood sugar levels. These include breads, cereals, pasta, rice, fruit and some starchy vegetables,
such as potato, sweet potato, pumpkin or corn.

- for more information about diabetes see www.diabetesaustralia.com.au

**Enzyme supplements**

The pancreas produces digestive enzymes that help break down the food you eat into basic nutrients that the body can use. When you have pancreatic cancer your body may not have enough of these digestive enzymes. This happens when the cancer blocks the pancreatic duct and it makes it difficult to digest fats or proteins (malabsorption).

Malabsorption can cause:

- cramping
- wind
- diarrhoea
- fatty bowel movements (stools) that are difficult to flush
- weight loss.

Your doctor may prescribe enzyme supplements to treat these symptoms. A dietitian can also advise you on dosage which can change depending on the amount of fat you eat. Generally a very low-fat meal or snack (such as fruit) may not need a capsule, while a meal with fried food would require a larger dose.

It may take time to get the right balance of enzyme supplements for the foods you are eating. Write down any digestive symptoms you can find the right balance faster. If the tablets cause side effects or if symptoms of malabsorption persist, tell your doctor or dietitian.

**Food-type nutrition supplements**

Nutritional supplements such as Ensure®, Sustagen® and Resource® can be used to boost a small meal or snack or to replace solid food. Most supplements contain a good variety of nutrients particularly energy (kilojoules/calories), protein, vitamins and minerals. They are available as ready-made drinks or in powdered form to be mixed with water or milk.

Nutrition supplements can be sprinkled onto cereal and fruit or mixed into foods such as mashed potato, gravy, casseroles, scrambled eggs, custard, hot and cold drinks and soup.

Most enzyme supplements are in capsule form. If you find it hard to swallow them, open the capsules and mix the contents with food that can be swallowed easily without chewing.

Protein and glucose powder supplements can also be added to meals and snacks for extra energy. These shouldn't be used as meal replacements as they don't provide vitamins or minerals. Glucose supplements may not be recommended if you have been diagnosed with diabetes.

Talk to your dietitian for more information about food-type nutrition supplements. The dietitian will advise you on the type and quantity you should have.

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