

Pancreatic Cancer

Understanding Pancreatic Cancer

Pancreatic cancer is a serious condition that can be hard to detect early. There are no standard screening tests for it, so it's often diagnosed when symptoms become noticeable. Some people at higher risk, due to certain genetic conditions, may have regular scans like CT, MRI, or ultrasounds.

Signs of pancreatic cancer can include unexplained weight loss, loss of appetite, upper abdominal or back pain, jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes), blood clots, diarrhea, or nausea and vomiting. Unfortunately, these symptoms often appear when the cancer is more advanced.

Staging Pancreatic Cancer

To diagnose pancreatic cancer, doctors use imaging tests like CT scans, MRIs, PET scans, and endoscopic ultrasounds. They often also take a tissue sample (biopsy). Then, they stage the cancer to understand how far it has spread. Staging involves checking the tumor size (T), lymph nodes (N), and if it has spread to other parts of the body or metastasized (M).

Treating Options

- **Relieving Jaundice:** If jaundice is present, it means the tumor may be blocking the bile duct. To help, your doctor might suggest an ERCP (endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography) or PTC (percutaneous transhepatic catheter) procedure to clear the blockage.

- **Deciding on Surgery:** Surgery can be an option, like a pancreaticoduodenectomy (Whipple procedure) or distal pancreatectomy. But surgery depends on factors like the tumor's location and how it affects nearby blood vessels. Sometimes, chemotherapy is given before surgery to shrink the tumor and make it easier to remove.
- **When Surgery Isn't an Option:** If the cancer can't be removed with surgery or if a patient isn't fit for surgery, the main treatment is systemic therapy. This includes chemotherapy using drugs like fluorouracil (5FU), irinotecan, oxaliplatin, gemcitabine, and nab-paclitaxel. There are also targeted therapies like olaparib for specific mutations such as BRCA.
- **Quality of Life Matters:** Regardless of treatment, it's important to focus on maintaining a good quality of life. Patients on systemic therapy often receive care from a palliative care physician, who specializes in improving symptoms and providing care that aligns with patients' goals.



Remember to discuss your specific diagnosis and treatment options with your doctor.