Early diagnosis of pancreatic cancer

1. Risk factors for pancreatic cancer are unclear. However, there is evidence that increasing age, smoking, being overweight, a family history of pancreatic cancer, pancreatitis and diabetes may increase the risk of pancreatic cancer.

2. Pancreatic cancer symptoms can be vague and varied. They include indigestion, abdominal pain and/or back pain, unexplained weight loss, nausea, loss of appetite, and changes in bowel habits, including steatorrhoea. Jaundice can also be a symptom of pancreatic cancer and requires urgent referral.

3. Pancreatic cancer should be considered in new onset diabetes, especially in those aged over 60 years, or unstable diabetes in previously stable type II diabetic patients.

4. Encourage patients to keep a diary of their symptoms, including the frequency and period of time over which they occur. Give your patient a definite timescale, such as 4 weeks, to return if their symptoms persist.

5. Think pancreatic cancer if conditions such as GORD (gastro-oesophageal reflux disease), gallstones, irritable bowel syndrome, hepatitis or pancreatitis are not improving with treatment.


7. The pancreas isn’t always well visualised on an ultrasound scan and is not seen on a gastroscopy, so these tests can be falsely reassuring if normal. If your patient’s symptoms continue or deteriorate consider urgent suspected cancer referral (or direct access CT scan if available locally).

8. Pancreatic cancer can be easy to miss because the symptoms may be confused with other common conditions. If a patient, of any age, presents repeatedly with unresolved gastrointestinal symptoms consider further investigation.

9. Do not request tumour markers in a patient with suspected pancreatic cancer. They are not a rule out test.

10. The Pancreatic Cancer UK Support Line (0808 801 0707), staffed by specialist nurses, is available for both professionals and patients who require more information and support.

For more information on how pancreatic cancer is diagnosed go to pancreaticcancer.org.uk/diagnosis or macmillan.org.uk/gp

Pancreatic Cancer is not a common cancer. A full-time GP may only see a new patient with pancreatic cancer every 5–8 years. However it is often diagnosed late and is the fifth most common cause of cancer death in the UK. Nearly 50% of pancreatic cancers are diagnosed as an emergency.

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