

PRIMARY CARE 10 TOP TIPS

Early diagnosis of pancreatic cancer

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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- 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 steatorrhea. 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.
- 6** Consider pancreatic cancer in patients with new onset mechanical back pain in association with new gastrointestinal symptoms.
- 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

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