



UNDERSTANDING PANCREATITIS

Overview

Pancreatitis is a condition that occurs when the pancreas, which is a gland located behind the stomach and near the liver, becomes inflamed. The pancreas produces digestive enzymes which are needed to digest food and insulin which is needed to control blood sugar. When the pancreas is inflamed, it releases its own enzymes (which are usually stored inside the organ) causing damage to the pancreas and surrounding structures.

There are two forms of pancreatitis. The acute form occurs suddenly and can be very severe and lead to death. After successful treatment of acute pancreatitis, the gland usually recovers completely. Chronic (long term) pancreatitis occurs when there is continuous damage to the pancreas that can lead to ongoing pain and a permanent decrease in its function.

Pancreatitis affects one million Canadians; chronic pancreatitis affects more than 300,000 Canadians; and, acute pancreatitis affects more than 600,000 Canadians. Acute care inpatient costs for pancreas diseases are ranked as the fifth most expensive digestive diseases in Canada costing approximately \$120 million per year.^o

What causes pancreatitis?

Acute pancreatitis is mainly caused by gallstone obstruction of the pancreatic duct or by alcohol. Other causes include certain drugs, high levels of fat, viral infections such as

mumps or in some cases it may run in families. Chronic pancreatitis is mainly caused by chronic alcohol intake in adults or cystic fibrosis in the young. In some cases pancreatitis is genetic. Obesity is a well-known risk factor for developing severe, acute pancreatitis. The "obesity epidemic" of the western world will likely increase the total number of patients within the next few decades.

How do I know if I have pancreatitis?

Both acute and chronic pancreatitis cause pain, usually in the upper abdomen. Typically pain spreads straight to the middle of the back. It may come on after heavy alcohol use or eating. It is frequently accompanied by nausea and vomiting. It is worse when lying flat and better when bending forward. In severe cases there may be fever, sweating, fast heartbeat, lightheadedness and fainting. It can lead to heart, lung and kidney failure and ultimately death.

When the pancreas is continuously damaged, such as with persistent drinking of alcohol, chronic pancreatitis may develop. There may be continuous pain, loss of weight, diarrhea and the development of diabetes.

The diagnosis of acute pancreatitis is made from the medical history and symptoms. During the attack, a blood test may show a high level of amylase or lipase (digestive enzymes

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formed by the pancreas). Other blood tests may show abnormal blood sugar, calcium or fat. These blood tests usually return to normal after an attack. Other tests include X-ray of the abdomen and chest, an ultrasound or a CT scan of the pancreas and the gallbladder.

How is pancreatitis treated?

Patients with acute pancreatitis are usually admitted to hospital where they are kept without eating or drinking. They receive fluid through a vein (intravenous). This allows the pancreas to rest. A tube may be placed through the nose down into the stomach to remove fluids and help with the nausea and vomiting. Pain killers are given to relieve the pain.

When the pancreatitis is caused by a gallstone, it can be removed by an endoscopic procedure called ERCP. This technique involves passing a thin flexible tube called an endoscope through the mouth into the small intestine where the pancreas empties its digestive enzymes. Most people feel better within a few days, after which time liquid can be started and low-fat, solid food can be added.

Patients with chronic pancreatitis may need frequent pain medications, especially if alcohol intake is not stopped. Because the pancreas is permanently damaged, there may be a need for enzyme replacement to compensate for the lack of digestive enzymes. In severe cases there may be a need for insulin injections to control blood sugar. In very severe cases, surgery may be required.

More information

For more information about protecting and enhancing your digestive health, please visit www.CDHF.ca

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- Please send me information about protecting and improving my digestive health.

Over 20 million Canadians suffer from digestive disorders every year. The Canadian Digestive Health Foundation believes this is unnecessary and unacceptable.

We reduce suffering and improve quality of life by empowering Canadians with trusted, up to date, science-based information about digestive health and disease.

As the Foundation of the Canadian Association of Gastroenterology, we work directly with leading physicians, scientists, and other health care professionals to help you understand and take control of your digestive health with confidence and optimism.

Through research and public education, we aim to:

 <p>REDUCE the incidence and prevalence of digestive disorders</p>	 <p>IMPROVE understanding of digestive health issues</p>
 <p>SUPPORT those suffering from digestive disorders</p>	 <p>ENHANCE quality of life for those living with digestive disorders</p>

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