

KNOW ABOUT PANCREATIC DISEASES



THE PANCREAS is an important organ for producing enzymes to digest fats, proteins and carbohydrates. The enzymes are transported to the duodenum (small intestines) where they help break down food into nutrients to be absorbed by the digestive tract. It also produces the hormone insulin which is important for regulating the amount of sugar or glucose in the blood. The insulin is released into the blood stream flowing through the pancreas.

TYPES OF PANCREATIC DISEASES

These include diabetes mellitus, acute pancreatitis, chronic pancreatitis, pancreatic enzyme deficiency, and pancreas cancer.

The pancreas is responsible for producing insulin. However, the exact causes stopping insulin production is unknown. Patients suffering from diabetes mellitus regulate their blood sugar levels through medication and dietary control. Other patients who develop diabetes later in life (known as Type II diabetes) seem to be producing sufficient amounts of insulin in their pancreas but it is not available for use by the body. Doctors now find there is correlation between obesity and Type II diabetes, therefore, weight loss is critical to ensure their diabetic conditions do not worsen.

Pancreatitis is an inflammation of the pancreas. The condition is caused by the digestive enzymes of the pancreas being “activated” inside the pancreas instead of the duodenum, causing destruction of the pancreatic tissues. It usually presents with pain in the upper abdomen and can also cause nausea and vomiting. The abdominal region feels tender, and the patient appears sickly.

The most common cause of acute pancreatitis is a blocked pancreatic duct, caused by gallstones. The back flow of pancreatic juices can cause damage in a matter of hours. Acute pancreatitis may lead to

internal bleeding and infection, and can be life-threatening. Hence, immediate medical attention is mandatory.

Diagnosis is conducted by detecting the increased pancreas enzyme levels in the blood, and an ultrasound or CT scan of the abdomen will often show an enlarged pancreas. Treatment is by giving the pancreas some rest through bowel rest, hospitalisation, intravenous feeding, and pain medications.

Chronic pancreatitis is characterised by persistent abdominal pain. However, there may or may not be elevated levels of pancreatic enzymes in the blood. The disease progresses slowly, resulting in slow destruction of the pancreas, and leading to other problems like bacterial infections and Type 2 diabetes. The main causes of chronic pancreatitis are gall bladder disease and alcoholism. If the cause of chronic pancreatitis is blocked gall bladder, then removal of gallstones will be conducted.

Cancer of the pancreas is the fourth leading cause of cancer death in the US. It has been called a “silent” disease because early pancreatic cancer usually does not cause symptoms. If the tumour blocks the common bile duct and bile cannot pass into the digestive system, the skin and whites of the eyes may become yellow, indicative of jaundice.

As the cancer grows and spreads, pain often develops in the upper abdomen and sometimes spreads to the back. The pain may become worse after the person eats or lies down. Cancer of the pancreas can also cause nausea, loss of appetite, weight loss, and weakness.

To diagnose pancreatic cancer, the doctor does a complete physical examination and asks about the patient’s personal and family medical history. Other tests may be ordered, such as CT scans, x-rays that give detailed pictures of a cross-section of the pancreas. A biopsy is the only sure way for the doctor to know whether cancer is present.

Pancreatic cancer is a serious malignancy. It is curable only when it is found in its earliest stages, before it has spread. However, it can be treated, symptoms can be relieved, and the quality of the patient’s life can be improved. Pancreatic cancer is treated with surgery, radiation therapy, or chemotherapy.

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