

## HEPATOBIILIARY AND LAPAROSCOPIC SURGERY

### Cysts in the pancreas

Depending on where they are located, pancreatic cysts produce no symptoms at all – or result in severe pain. Some cysts may turn cancerous and require aggressive treatment.



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While it tends to be an overlooked organ, the pancreas – six inches long and located just under the liver and next to the entry of the small intestine – plays essential roles in the body. It produces digestive enzymes that aid digestion and release into the bloodstream insulin and glucagon that help the body regulate blood sugar and control the way it uses food for energy. When cysts occur, they can disrupt the functioning of the pancreas and if unchecked, may turn cancerous.

#### Cysts and disease

There are two types of pancreatic cysts, pools of fluid within the tissue of the pancreas, and they are:

- True cysts (non-inflammatory cysts) are lined by a special layer of cells responsible for secreting fluid into the cysts
- Pseudocysts (inflammatory cysts) do not contain specialised lining cells but contain pancreatic digestive juices

These cysts can range in size from several millimetres to several centimetres. While pancreatic cysts are mostly small, benign and produce no symptoms, they can become large and cause symptoms. Some are cancerous or can become cancerous.

Depending on their size and location, pancreatic cysts can cause symptoms such as tummy or back pain if they exert pressure on surrounding tissues and nerves. If the cysts obstruct the bile duct, jaundice can occur.

Infected cysts may result in fever, chills, and sepsis. In rare situations, large pseudocysts compress the stomach or duodenum and obstruct the movement of food in the intestines. This can cause severe abdominal pain and/or vomiting. Look out for:

- Persistent abdominal pain that may move to the back
- A mass you can feel in your upper abdomen
- Nausea and vomiting

Though rare, a cyst can become infected or may rupture. See a doctor if you have a persistent fever and abdominal pain. Seek emergency medical treatment if:

- The pain becomes severe
- There is dizziness/faintness/loss of consciousness
- The heartbeat becomes weak and rapid
- There is vomiting of blood

No one knows why pancreatic cysts occur, though cancerous cysts may be due to genetic mutations, and pseudocysts may form after trauma or infection of the pancreas, a condition called pancreatitis.

The best way to avoid pseudocysts is to avoid pancreatitis, usually caused by gallstones or excessive alcohol use. In the case of gallstones, removal will reduce the occurrence of pancreatitis. If due to alcohol, reduction or cessation of drinking will reduce the risk of reoccurrence.

#### Detection and treatment

Because the majority of pancreatic cysts are small and produce no symptoms, they are often discovered incidentally during other scans of the abdomen. If you have a pancreatic cyst, treatment will depend on the type of cyst, its symptoms and whether it is benign or malignant.

While a cyst that does not exhibit symptoms can be left alone and monitored for any changes in size, one that does or grows larger should be drained. This can be done by various means, from endoscopic drainage to laparoscopic or open surgery, depending on the type and location of the cyst.

Treatment is important to deal with precancerous or cancerous cysts, to prevent cancer from developing or spreading. In these cases, the patient will be carefully evaluated for suitability for surgery. 

