



THE SILENT KILLER

THE PANCREAS IS A SMALL ORGAN - A TUBE-SHAPED ORGAN ONLY ABOUT 15CM long - located near the back of the abdomen, behind the stomach, but is one of the most important organs in the human body. Responsible for the production of digestive enzymes and several important hormones (such as insulin and somatostatin), when the pancreas fails many other vital organs also begin to fail along with it, causing the body to go into total shutdown.

Of all the pancreatic diseases, pancreatic cancer may be the most dangerous: it is the fourth most common cause of cancer-related deaths around the world, and has an average survival rate of about six to ten months for locally advanced and metastatic cancers.

One of the main problems with diagnosing pancreatic cancer is how "silent" it often is in the early stages, where it can go for months without a single symptom arising to warn the patient that something is wrong. Even when symptoms start to manifest, they tend to be varied and nonspecific, causing most patients to simply pass it off as part of growing older or as part of another disease.

One of the few symptoms that every patient at risk of pancreatic cancer should watch out for is jaundice, where the whites of one's eyes or skin gain a yellowish tint. Jaundice associated with pancreatic cancer is often painless and manifests only when the head of the pancreas turns cancerous (a fairly common phenomenon, happening 75 percent of the time) and obstructs the common bile duct running through the pancreas. One's stool or urine may also change colour as a result, turning pale and dark respectively.

As the cancer grows and spreads, an intermittent pain often develops in the upper abdomen that occasionally spreads to the back. The pain may become worse when the person is eating or lying down, and may sometimes be accompanied

by nausea, loss of appetite, weight loss and general weakness.

So what will increase your risk of developing pancreatic cancer? 5 to 10 percent of patients with pancreatic cancer have a family history of pancreatic cancer as well. The risk of developing pancreatic cancer also increases with age and is correlated with smoking, diets low in fruits and vegetables, and diets high in red meat and sugar-sweetened drinks.

To accurately diagnose if a patient has pancreatic cancer, the doctor performs a complete physical examination that cross-references the patient's personal and family medical history. Other tests may be ordered, such as CT scans or X-rays of the patient's pancreas, but the only sure way for a doctor to know if the cancer is present is through a biopsy. This is a procedure where the doctor removes a small slice of tissue from the pancreas and examines it under a microscope for cancerous cells.

Due to the high mortality rate of pancreatic cancer, the odds of successfully curing the cancer decreases dramatically the longer it goes undetected. For this reason, if you feel that you are at risk of developing pancreatic cancer, talk to a doctor as soon as you can so that an accurate diagnosis can be made. ■