

# THE LOWDOWN ON PANCREATIC CYSTS

**P**ANCREATIC CYSTS ARE SAC-LIKE pockets of fluid on or within your pancreas. The pancreas is an organ located behind the stomach, which produces enzymes to help digest food, as well as hormones like insulin, glucagon, and somatostatin.

Some pancreatic cysts are true cysts (non-inflammatory cysts), that is, they are lined by a special layer of cells that are responsible for secreting fluid into the cysts. Other cysts are pseudocysts (inflammatory cysts) and do not contain specialized lining cells. Often these pseudocysts contain pancreatic digestive juices because they are connected to the pancreatic ducts.

Pancreatic cysts can range in size from several millimeters to several centimeters. Many pancreatic cysts are small and benign, and produce no symptoms, but some cysts become large and cause symptoms, while others are cancerous or precancerous. Precancerous cysts are benign cysts that have the potential to become cancerous.

Pancreatic cysts are diagnosed more often than in the past because improved imaging technology finds them more readily. Many pancreatic cysts are found during abdominal scans for other problems.

When signs or symptoms of pancreatic cysts do occur, they typically include:

- Persistent abdominal pain, which may radiate to your back

- A mass you can feel in your upper abdomen
- Nausea and vomiting

The cause of pancreatic cysts is often unknown. Cancerous cysts can be caused by genetic mutations. Some cysts are associated with rare illnesses including von Hippel-Lindau disease, a genetic disorder that can affect the pancreas and other organs.

Pseudocysts may be formed after an attack of acute pancreatitis, a painful condition in which digestive enzymes become prematurely active and irritate the pancreas. Such cysts contain digestive enzymes such as amylase in high concentrations. Pseudocysts can also result from injury to the abdomen, such as from a car accident.

Treatment depends on the type of cyst you have and whether it is causing symptoms. The most important aspect of management of pancreatic cysts is to determine if a cyst is benign or if it is cancerous and must be removed. A benign pseudocyst, even a large one, can be left alone as long as it isn't bothering you. A pseudocyst that is causing bothersome symptoms or growing larger may be drained using an endoscope.

If the cyst is precancerous or cancerous, then surgery may be needed.

The best way to avoid pseudocysts is to avoid pancreatitis, which is usually caused by gallstones or heavy use of alcohol. If gallstones are triggering pancreatitis, you may need to have your gallbladder removed. If your pancreatitis is due to alcohol use, abstaining from alcohol can reduce your risk. ■



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