

Pancreatic Cancer

What Is Pancreatic Cancer?

Pancreatic cancer occurs when abnormal cells in the pancreas grow uncontrollably. The pancreas is a vital organ located behind the stomach that produces enzymes to help digest food and hormones such as insulin to regulate blood sugar. Pancreatic cancer is a serious condition because it is often not detected until it has reached an advanced stage. Early diagnosis is crucial for improving outcomes, but symptoms are frequently subtle or absent in the early stages.

Types Of Pancreatic Cancer

There are two main types of pancreatic cancer:

- **Exocrine pancreatic cancer:** This is the most common type and includes pancreatic ductal adenocarcinoma, which accounts for over 90% of cases. It begins in the cells lining the ducts of the pancreas that produce digestive enzymes.
- **Endocrine pancreatic cancer:** Also known as pancreatic neuroendocrine tumours (NETs), this rarer form develops in the hormone-producing cells of the pancreas. These tumours tend to grow more slowly than exocrine tumours.

Risk Factors For Pancreatic Cancer

Several factors may increase the risk of developing pancreatic cancer, including:

- **Age:** Most people diagnosed with pancreatic cancer are over 60 years old.
- **Smoking:** Smoking is one of the leading risk factors for pancreatic cancer.
- **Chronic pancreatitis:** Long-term inflammation of the pancreas can increase the risk of cancer.
- **Diabetes:** People with diabetes, particularly those with type 2 diabetes, have a higher risk of developing pancreatic cancer.
- **Family history:** A family history of pancreatic cancer or genetic conditions like BRCA gene mutations can increase the likelihood of developing the disease.
- **Obesity:** Being overweight or obese is associated with a higher risk of pancreatic cancer.

Symptoms Of Pancreatic Cancer

Pancreatic cancer often does not cause symptoms in the early stages, which is why it is frequently diagnosed late. However, as the tumour grows, symptoms may develop, including:

- **Abdominal or back pain:** Pain in the upper abdomen that may spread to the back is a common symptom.
- **Jaundice:** Yellowing of the skin and eyes, dark urine, and pale stools, caused by a blockage in the bile duct.
- **Unexplained weight loss:** Sudden, unintentional weight loss is often a symptom of advanced cancer.
- **Loss of appetite:** A reduced desire to eat can accompany weight loss.
- **Nausea and vomiting:** These may occur if the tumour presses on the stomach or intestines.
- **Fatigue:** Persistent tiredness and weakness may also be experienced.
- **New-onset diabetes:** In some cases, pancreatic cancer can cause sudden changes in blood sugar levels, leading to diabetes.

If you experience any of these symptoms, it's important to seek medical advice as soon as possible. Early diagnosis can lead to better treatment outcomes.

Diagnosis Of Pancreatic Cancer

At Birmingham Liver Clinic, we use advanced diagnostic tools to detect pancreatic cancer. These may include:

- **Blood tests:** These check for tumour markers, such as CA19-9, which may be elevated in people with pancreatic cancer.
- **Imaging tests:** CT scans, MRI scans, and endoscopic ultrasound (EUS) provide detailed images of the pancreas to detect tumours or other abnormalities.
- **Biopsy:** A biopsy involves taking a small sample of tissue from the pancreas for analysis to confirm the presence of cancer cells.
- **Endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography (ERCP):** This procedure involves inserting a flexible tube with a camera into the digestive tract to examine the bile ducts and pancreas, sometimes taking biopsies or placing stents to relieve blockages.

Treatment Options For Pancreatic Cancer

Treatment for pancreatic cancer depends on the location, size, and stage of the tumour, as well as the patient's overall health. At Birmingham Liver Clinic, we offer a range of treatment options:

- **Surgery:**
 - **Whipple procedure (pancreaticoduodenectomy):** This is the most common surgery for pancreatic cancer. It involves removing the head of the pancreas, part of the stomach, the gallbladder, and part of the bile duct, followed by reconstruction of the digestive system.
 - **Distal pancreatectomy:** This surgery involves removing the tail and body of the pancreas.
 - **Total pancreatectomy:** In rare cases, the entire pancreas is removed.

- **Chemotherapy:** Chemotherapy involves using drugs to kill cancer cells. It may be used before surgery to shrink the tumour, or after surgery to kill any remaining cancer cells.
- **Radiotherapy:** High-energy radiation is used to destroy cancer cells. This may be used in conjunction with chemotherapy (chemoradiotherapy) or as a standalone treatment to control symptoms.
- **Targeted therapy:** Certain drugs are designed to target specific genetic changes in cancer cells. This treatment is often used in advanced cases of pancreatic cancer.
- **Palliative care:** For patients with advanced pancreatic cancer, palliative care focuses on managing symptoms and improving quality of life. This may involve pain relief, stent placement to relieve bile duct blockages, or nutritional support.

Why Choose Birmingham Liver Clinic?

At Birmingham Liver Clinic, we provide expert care and treatment for patients with pancreatic cancer, led by a team of highly skilled hepato-pancreato-biliary (HPB) surgeons. Our team provides the highest standard of care and ensures that each patient receives a personalised treatment plan. With access to the latest diagnostic tools and advanced treatment options, we provide comprehensive care tailored to your specific needs

Contact Us

If you are concerned about pancreatic cancer or want to explore treatment options, contact Birmingham Liver Clinic today.