



Education

Acute Pancreatitis

What is acute pancreatitis?

Pancreatitis is a condition that occurs when the pancreas, an organ behind the stomach, becomes swollen and painful.

The pancreas produces digestive enzymes and insulin. The digestive enzymes flow into the small intestine to help break down food. Insulin is released into the blood to control the level of sugar (glucose) in the blood.

Pancreatitis can be acute or chronic. Acute pancreatitis occurs as one sudden episode. After acute pancreatitis the pancreas usually returns to its normal condition. Chronic pancreatitis means ongoing or repeated bouts of pancreatitis in which there is permanent damage to the pancreas.

How does it occur?

The causes of acute pancreatitis are not completely understood.

- About half of the people who have pancreatitis have gallstones. Gallstones can block the flow of pancreatic secretions into the intestines.
- Drinking too much alcohol can lead to pancreatitis.
- Less frequent causes are some medicines, stomach or duodenal ulcers, surgery, or injury, such as being hit in the stomach.
- Sometimes very high levels of blood fats (triglycerides) cause pancreatitis.

What are the symptoms?

The main symptom is severe pain in the middle of your upper abdomen. The pain:

- often occurs 12 to 24 hours after a large meal or heavy drinking
- spreads to your back and chest
- is steady and sharp
- gets worse when you move
- feels better when you sit or lean forward
- usually makes you vomit.

Other symptoms are:

- fever
- bloating.

In severe cases, you may have signs of shock, including:

- restlessness
- a fast heartbeat
- lightheadedness
- confusion
- a cold sweat.

If you have abdominal pain and any of these signs of shock, get emergency care or call 911 right away.

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will ask about your medical history, particularly about how much alcohol you drink and whether you have had gallstones. Your provider will ask about your symptoms and examine you.

You may have the following tests:

- blood tests
- urine tests
- x-rays of your abdomen and chest
- ultrasound exam of the pancreas and gallbladder
- CT scan of the pancreas
- ERCP, which is a way of looking at your pancreas through a slim flexible tube called an endoscope, which is passed through your mouth and stomach to where your pancreas and intestines are connected.

How is it treated?

You will probably stay in the hospital.

- To rest your pancreas, you cannot eat or drink anything for a while. You will not start drinking or eating again until the abdominal pain stops.
- You will be given fluids through your vein (IV).
- A tube may be put through your nose down into your stomach to remove fluids and help prevent nausea, vomiting, and bloating. This is called nasogastric suction.
- You may have to stop taking some medicines you have been taking.
- A narcotic drug or other pain reliever will be prescribed for your abdominal pain. You may have other medicines as well.
- You will need to stay in bed and take it easy.
- When the pain stops, you can start drinking clear liquids and gradually progress to eating a normal diet.
- If you have gallstones, they may be removed while you are in the hospital to prevent another attack of pancreatitis.

Your health care provider may decide you can leave the hospital when you no longer have pain and are able to eat. Most people treated with nasogastric suction and IV fluids start feeling better in 1 to 3 days and go home in 5 to 10 days. More severe disease requires treatment in an intensive care unit (ICU) and a hospital stay of several weeks.

How long do the effects last?

Most people recover completely, especially if the disease is diagnosed early enough. Severe pancreatitis, however, can be life threatening.

How can I take care of myself?

- Follow the instructions your health care provider gives you. This includes how you take any medicines he or she has prescribed.
- Don't take any other medicines, including nonprescription drugs, without asking your health care provider.
- Ask your provider if you need a special diet.
- Avoid drinking alcohol.

How can I help prevent another attack of acute pancreatitis?

Pancreatitis can recur and can become an ongoing problem. To help prevent another attack:

- Avoid drinking alcohol if you are advised to do so by your health care provider.
- Follow the diet your health care provider prescribes.
- Follow your provider's recommendations for keeping your blood fats at a normal level.
- Follow your provider's recommendations for physical activity.

If gallstones caused the pancreatitis and they have not been removed, surgery to remove them may help prevent further attacks.

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