

Feeling and being sick if you have pancreatic cancer

This fact sheet is for anyone who would like to find out more about feeling and being sick when you have pancreatic cancer. It explains what causes sickness and the treatments available that can help you. Talk to your doctor, nurse or GP if you feel or are sick.



You can also speak to our specialist nurses on our confidential Support Line about feeling and being sick. Call free on **0808 801 0707** or email **nurse@pancreaticcancer.org.uk**

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Feeling and being sick

Feeling sick (nausea) and being sick (vomiting) are very common if you have pancreatic cancer. This can be caused by the cancer or be a side effect of treatment. It is unpleasant and distressing. It may also mean that you are not properly absorbing medicines that you take as tablets.

Speak to your GP, doctor or nurse if you have nausea or vomiting. There are treatments that can help. It's not something you have to put up with. There are effective anti-sickness (anti-emetic) medicines that can help. Read more about these on page 6.

Persistent vomiting

If you are being sick a lot (persistent vomiting) and are struggling to keep down any food or fluid, this can be a sign that something is wrong. It can lead to dehydration (where your body loses more water than it takes in) and your body may not get the nutrition it needs. Signs of dehydration include dark or strong smelling urine (pee) and passing less urine. It can also cause headaches, feeling thirsty and feeling dizzy or lightheaded.

Contact your GP or medical team if you have been vomiting for half a day or longer and can't keep down any food or fluid or have signs of dehydration. You could also call 111.

You may need to go to hospital, where they will work out the cause of the vomiting. You may need to be given fluid through a drip into a vein to treat dehydration.

What causes sickness?

There are a few things that can cause sickness if you have pancreatic cancer.

Blocked duodenum

The cancer can block the duodenum, which is the first part of the small intestine. The blockage can stop food passing out of the stomach into the duodenum. The food builds up in your stomach and makes you feel and be sick.

If you are having long term treatment and are well enough, you may have bypass surgery to treat the blockage. This is an operation that connects the stomach to

the small intestine below the blockage so food can pass through. This should stop the sickness. Or you may have a hollow tube called a stent put in to open up the blockage and stop the sickness.

If you have a blocked duodenum, your doctor will talk to you about the best treatment for you.



Read more about bypass surgery on our website at:
pancreaticcancer.org.uk/bypass

Read more about duodenal stents at:
pancreaticcancer.org.uk/duodenalstent

Stomach emptying slowly

Pancreatic cancer can affect the nerves and hormones that control the stomach. If this happens, food passes through the stomach more slowly. This is called delayed gastric emptying or gastroparesis. It can make you feel full all the time and feel sick. It can also cause other problems like indigestion (a painful, burning feeling in your chest) and difficulty finishing even small meals. Medicines such as steroids and certain types of anti-sickness medicine can help.

Jaundice

The cancer can block the bile duct. This is the tube that takes a fluid called bile from the liver to the duodenum (the first part of the small intestine).

If the bile duct is blocked it causes jaundice, which can make you feel and be sick, as well as turning your eyes and skin yellow. A hollow tube called a stent may be put in to open up the blockage. This should treat the jaundice and stop the sickness.



Read more about jaundice on our website at:
pancreaticcancer.org.uk/jaundice

Read more about biliary stents in our fact sheet: **Stents to treat jaundice caused by a blocked bile duct**

Or on our website at: **pancreaticcancer.org.uk/biliarystent**

Some treatments for the cancer

Some treatments for the cancer, such as chemotherapy or radiotherapy, can make you feel sick. You should be given anti-sickness medicine to help with this.

You may also feel sick after having surgery to remove the cancer. This is because it can take time for your digestive system to start working properly again. The sickness can be treated with drugs and is usually only temporary. Eating smaller meals more often can also help.



Read more about chemotherapy, radiotherapy and surgery at: pancreaticcancer.org.uk/treatments

Problems digesting food

Pancreatic cancer can cause problems with digesting food, which can make you feel and be sick. Problems digesting food can be treated with pancreatic enzyme replacement therapy (PERT), which should relieve sickness.



Read more about digestion and pancreatic enzyme replacement therapy in our booklet: **Diet and pancreatic cancer**
Or on our website at: pancreaticcancer.org.uk/diet

Some medicines

Some medicines such as antibiotics and opioid painkillers (for example, morphine) can make you feel sick. Follow the advice your medical team give you about how to take your medicines, as this will help to prevent sickness. This includes instructions about taking tablets with or after food. Your doctor or nurse may also give you anti-sickness medicine.

Opioid painkillers can cause constipation (when you find it harder to poo), which can cause sickness, as well as being very uncomfortable. You should be given medicines called laxatives to take with opioids. If these don't help, speak to your nurse or doctor.



Read more about opioid painkillers in our booklet:

Pain and pancreatic cancer

Or on our website at: pancreaticcancer.org.uk/pain

Read more about constipation at:

pancreaticcancer.org.uk/bowelhabits

Anxiety

Feeling anxious or distressed can make you feel sick. For example, people sometimes feel sick because they feel anxious before chemotherapy treatment.

There are things that can help with anxiety. Your doctor or nurse may give you a medicine to treat anxiety, such as lorazepam. Or you might find relaxation techniques can help.



Read more about about anxiety on our website at:

pancreaticcancer.org.uk/anxiety

Feeling and being sick towards the end of life

Feeling and being sick can also be a symptom towards the end of life. There are ways to manage this.



Read about sickness towards the end of life in our booklet:

Pancreatic cancer and end of life care: information for people in the last months, weeks and days of life

Or on our website at: pancreaticcancer.org.uk/sickness-end-of-life

What can help with feeling and being sick?

Tell your nurse, hospital doctor or GP if you are feeling or being sick. They can find the cause of your sickness and give you the most suitable anti-sickness medicines. They may also suggest other things that you can try.



You can also speak to our specialist nurses on our confidential Support Line about feeling and being sick.

Anti-sickness medicines

There are lots of different anti-sickness medicines available. Follow your doctor, nurse or pharmacist's instructions for how to take them. It helps to take the medicines regularly, and as soon as you are given them. Don't wait until you feel sick. It's easier to prevent sickness, and if you wait too long the symptoms can be harder to treat. Many anti-sickness medicines work better if you take them 30 minutes before eating.

If the medicines don't help, speak to your doctor about changing to a different one.

What anti-sickness medicines are available?

There are many different medicines that can help with sickness. Some are treatments for other conditions, but they can also treat sickness.

We have listed some of the anti-sickness medicines that are commonly used for pancreatic cancer. Other medicines may also be used. Speak to your doctor or nurse about the best ones for you. They are listed under their generic (general) names, not their brand names.

- **Domperidone** helps food to pass through the stomach into the bowel. It comes as tablets or a liquid.

- **Metoclopramide** blocks the part of your brain that controls being sick. It also helps food to pass through the stomach into the bowel. It comes as tablets, a liquid or an injection and can also be given through a syringe pump. A syringe pump (also called a syringe driver) provides a steady flow of painkillers and other medicines. It is a small battery operated machine that is attached to a needle inserted under the skin.
- **Prochlorperazine** blocks the part of your brain that controls being sick. It comes as a tablet you swallow, a tablet that dissolves in your mouth, or an injection.
- **Cyclizine** stops messages being sent to the part of your brain that controls being sick. It comes as tablets or an injection. It can also be given through a syringe pump.
- **Serotonin blockers** stop messages being sent to the part of your brain that controls being sick. They include ondansetron, granisetron and palonosetron. They come as tablets and injections, and work best when taken with a steroid. They should not be taken for a long time as they can cause severe constipation (when you find it harder to poo).
- **Aprepitant** is a tablet that may be used for people having chemotherapy if other anti-sickness medicines have not worked. It is usually combined with steroids and serotonin blockers. Fosaprepitant is similar and given as an injection.
- **Dexamethasone** is a steroid. It is mainly used for people having chemotherapy. It is usually for short term use or may be given in low doses for longer periods.
- **Sedatives** can be used for longer lasting sickness after chemotherapy, or for sickness from other medicines such as morphine. They include levomepromazine and haloperidol. They come as a tablet, a liquid or through an injection or infusion (a drip).

Anti-sickness medicines can cause side effects. Talk to your doctor or nurse about how to manage any side effects that you get, or about changing to a different medicine.

Can anything else help with sickness?

Some people with pancreatic cancer find other things can help them deal with sickness.

- Your sickness may be worse if you have an empty stomach, so try eating little but often rather than three big meals a day. Even a small snack like dry toast or a ginger biscuit may help.
- If the smell of food is making you feel sick, try asking someone to help prepare food for you. Closing the kitchen door can also reduce the smell.
- Some food and drinks can help. For example, some people find ginger or peppermint drinks can help. Try ginger beer or mint tea.
- Try avoiding very spicy, fatty or sweet foods as these may make nausea worse.
- Acupressure bracelets such as Sea-Bands® put pressure on a specific point on the inside of the wrist, which can help relieve nausea.
- Keep your mouth clean if you have been sick. Brush your teeth regularly and rinse your mouth with mouthwash. After being sick, wait for about 30 minutes before brushing your teeth, as stomach acid can weaken tooth enamel. Brushing straight away can make this worse.
- Tell your medical team if you have white spots in your mouth. This could be oral thrush, which can make sickness worse. It can be treated easily.
- You might also find it useful to keep a diary of when you feel sick and what you do about it. This can help you to see what causes your sickness and what makes it better or worse.

“ I often have to nibble at things to keep nausea at bay.”

“ I found having peppermints at hand helped nausea, plus I found that eating little but often helped a great deal.”

“ My dad found sucking sweets helped with the bile taste in his mouth which made him feel very sick and prevented him eating at times.”



Read more tips for things that can help with sickness on our website at: pancreaticcancer.org.uk/sicknesstips

Can complementary therapies help with sickness?

Some people find that complementary therapies such as acupuncture, meditation and hypnotherapy can reduce sickness. This may be because they help you relax, and relieve stress and anxiety.

Always tell your medical team before you start a complementary therapy, as some may affect your cancer treatment. And tell your complementary therapist about your cancer treatment.



Read more about complementary therapies on our website at: pancreaticcancer.org.uk/complementarytherapies



Questions to ask your doctor or nurse

What is the cause of my feeling and being sick?

What anti-sickness medicines are available for me?

Are there any possible side effects of this anti-sickness medicine?

Is there anything else that may help with feeling and being sick?

Further information and support

Pancreatic Cancer UK services

We are here for everyone affected by pancreatic cancer.

Our specialist nurses are here to talk now

If your world has been turned upside down by a pancreatic cancer diagnosis, we are here to talk now. We can answer your questions, recommend practical steps and provide the emotional support you and those close to you need, when you need it most.

Call free on **0808 801 0707** or email [**nurse@pancreaticcancer.org.uk**](mailto:nurse@pancreaticcancer.org.uk)

Expert information

Our free information covers everything about pancreatic cancer to help you understand your diagnosis, ask questions, make decisions and live as well as you can.

Go to: [**pancreaticcancer.org.uk/information**](http://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/information)

Download or order our free publications at:
[**pancreaticcancer.org.uk/publications**](http://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/publications) or call **0808 801 0707**

Our online forum

The forum is a supportive online space where everyone affected by pancreatic cancer can be there for each other at any time.

Go to: [**forum.pancreaticcancer.org.uk**](http://forum.pancreaticcancer.org.uk)

Living with Pancreatic Cancer Online Support Sessions

Our online support sessions are hosted by our specialist pancreatic cancer nurses and will give you the chance to connect with others who have also been diagnosed.

Go to: [**pancreaticcancer.org.uk/supportsessions**](http://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/supportsessions)

Real life stories

Read other people's experiences of pancreatic cancer to find out how they coped with their diagnosis and treatment and their tips on looking after themselves.

Go to: [**pancreaticcancer.org.uk/stories**](http://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/stories)

Useful organisations

Cancer Research UK

www.cancerresearchuk.org

Helpline: 0808 800 4040 (Mon-Fri 9am-5pm)

Information for anyone affected by cancer.

Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council

www.cnhc.org.uk

Tel: 020 020 3327 2720 (Mon-Fri 9am-5pm)

Information about complementary health care and a register of therapists.

Healthtalk

www.healthtalk.org

Personal experiences presented in written, audio and video formats, including people talking about pancreatic cancer.

Macmillan Cancer Support

www.macmillan.org.uk

Support Line: 0808 808 00 00 (Every day, 8am-8pm)

Provides practical, medical and financial support for anyone affected by cancer.

Maggie's Centres

www.maggies.org

Telephone: 0300 123 1801

Centres around the UK and online offer free practical, emotional and social support for anyone affected by cancer.

This fact sheet has been produced by the Support and Information Team at Pancreatic Cancer UK.

We make every effort to make sure that our services provide up-to-date, accurate information about pancreatic cancer. We hope this will add to the medical advice you have had, and help you make decisions about your treatment and care. This information should not replace advice from the medical team – please speak to your doctor, nurse or other members of your medical team about any questions.

Email us at **publications@pancreaticcancer.org.uk** for references to the sources of information used to write this fact sheet.

Give us your feedback

We hope you have found this information helpful. We are always keen to improve our information, so let us know if you have any comments or suggestions. Email us at **publications@pancreaticcancer.org.uk** or write to our Information Manager at the address below.

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© Pancreatic Cancer UK June 2022
Review date June 2025

Registered charity number 1112708 (England and Wales), and SC046392 (Scotland)