

The Pancreas

What Is the Pancreas?

The pancreas is a gland in the abdomen between the stomach and the spine. This gland produces hormones and juices that help digestion. The stomach, liver, intestine, and other organs are around the pancreas.

The pancreas is long and flat about six inches long. The head of the pancreas connects to the small intestine on the right side of the abdomen. The middle section is called the body, and the narrow end called the tail extends up and to the left.

What Does the Pancreas Do?

The pancreas makes insulin and other hormones. These hormones enter the bloodstream and travel through the body. Insulin and hormones help the body use or store the energy that comes from food. For example, insulin helps control the amount of sugar in the blood.

The pancreas makes pancreatic juices. These juices contain enzymes that help digest food. The pancreas releases the juices into ducts leading to the common bile duct. The common bile duct empties into the first section of the small intestine called the duodenum.

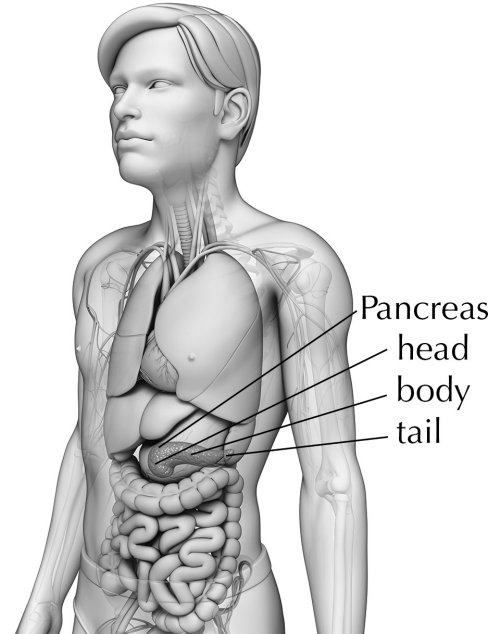
Cancer and the Pancreas

Everywhere in the body, new cells form to replace old, dead cells all the time. Sometimes new cells form in the pancreas when they are not needed, or old cells do not die when they should. Extra cells can build up and form a mass of tissue called a growth or tumor. Tumors can be benign or malignant.

Benign tumors are not cancer. Usually, doctors can remove them. Most of the time, benign tumors do not come back after they are removed. Their cells do not spread to tissues around them or to other parts of the body. Benign tumors are rarely a threat to life.

Malignant tumors are cancer. They are usually more serious and may be life-threatening. Cancer cells can spread to nearby tissues and organs. Cancer cells can also break away from the tumor and enter the bloodstream or lymphatic system. They spread from the original, or primary, tumor and form new tumors in other organs.

The spread of cancer is called metastasis.



The pancreas is a gland that makes insulin and digestive juices.

About 90% of pancreatic cancers are adenocarcinomas. The other 10% are neuroendocrine tumors. People with neuroendocrine tumors have a better chance of recovery.

Finding Pancreatic Cancer Early

Finding cancer early allows for more treatment options. There are usually few signs before pancreatic cancer has spread to other parts of the body. Here are some signs:

- Pain in the upper abdomen or upper back
- Yellow skin and eyes, and dark urine from jaundice
- Weakness
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea and vomiting
- Weight loss

These are not sure signs of pancreatic cancer. An infection or other problem can also cause them. Anyone with these symptoms should see a doctor as soon as possible.