Acute Pancreatitis

What is it?

Acute pancreatitis is inflammation, or swelling of the pancreas. The pancreas sits in the center of the abdomen and is connected to the bile ducts of the liver as well as the intestine by a series of channels called ducts. If the ducts from the pancreas become blocked, or obstructed, the pancreas will release digestive enzymes as a response, which causes swelling of the pancreas.

What causes it?

Acute pancreatitis is usually the result of either gallstones that leave the gallbladder and travel to the pancreatic duct, causing an obstruction, or alcohol that causes irritation of the pancreas.

What are the symptoms?

Acute pancreatitis may cause upper abdominal pain that is often described as constant, gnawing, and radiating to the back. Patients may also develop nausea and vomiting. Some cases of pancreatitis are mild, and require a short hospitalization and elimination of the cause. If gallstones are the cause, the gallbladder should be removed to prevent repeat attacks. If alcohol consumption is the cause, patients should abstain from alcohol. Other episodes of pancreatitis may cause a severe, life-threatening illness that requires a prolonged hospitalization.

Treatment options

Most cases of pancreatitis will improve on their own without surgery. Patients are treated by giving intravenous nutrition and preventing complications such as pneumonia, kidney failure, and other problems. Patients may require surgery if they develop infections within the abdomen or fail to get better without surgery.
Chronic Pancreatitis

What is it?

Chronic pancreatitis is a condition in which the pancreas becomes dysfunctional after repeated attacks of acute pancreatitis. The pancreas normally releases digestive enzymes after eating to help break down food. In chronic pancreatitis, this may become very painful, as the channels within the pancreas that carry the enzymes become scarred.

What causes it?

Chronic pancreatitis results from repeated attacks of acute pancreatitis. The vast majority of pancreatitis results from gallstones or from drinking alcohol. Some patients may have a genetic predisposition to pancreatitis, but this is uncommon.

What are the symptoms?

Chronic pancreatitis may cause constant, unrelenting pain in the upper abdomen. The pain may be worse with eating. Also, patients may develop diabetes as the pancreas becomes irreversibly damaged over time, leading to insulin treatment. The primary complaint, however, is pain.

How is it diagnosed?

Chronic pancreatitis is diagnosed by imaging tests. ERCP and MRI are used to detect changes in the pancreatic duct, the main channel that carries enzymes into the intestine. This duct becomes scarred and dilated in chronic pancreatitis. CT scan may be used to detect calcifications and any masses that may develop within the pancreas.

Treatment options

Treatment for chronic pancreatitis depends on the severity of the disease. Some patients have mild pain that can be controlled with oral medications. Others may require pain injections into the nerves around the pancreas. This can usually be performed endoscopically.

Some patients may be candidates for surgery. Surgical treatments for chronic pancreatitis include both removing part of the pancreas and bypassing the scarred pancreatic duct to relieve the blockages that lead to pain attacks. These operations are usually performed through an incision in the upper abdomen. The operation may take 2-4 hours, and patients typically stay in the hospital 5-7 days.

This information is not intended to replace a visit with your physician. To make an appointment with one of our surgeons, please call 614-293-3230.