



## Patient Education Pancreatitis

**Dear Patient:**

### **What Is Pancreatitis?**

There are two types of pancreatitis, chronic and acute. Both are inflammations of the pancreas, a gland that produces digestive enzymes, which your body uses to break down the foods you eat.

The symptoms of acute pancreatitis are typically severe and need to be treated immediately.

Chronic pancreatitis develops over a number of years, usually after a history of recurrent attacks of acute pancreatitis. Chronic pancreatitis may cause you to lose the ability to secrete the enzymes your body needs to digest foods. The resulting condition, known as pancreatic insufficiency, is signaled by weight loss -- either gradual or sudden -- and foul-smelling stools or diarrhea. Chronic pancreatitis can also lead to diabetes.

### **What Causes It?**

Acute pancreatitis is most often caused by excessive alcohol drinking and gallstones. It can also be caused by viral and bacterial infections, drugs, blockage of the pancreatic duct, trauma or surgery to the abdomen, elevated calcium levels, or extremely high triglyceride levels (a type of fat that circulates in the blood).

### **What Are the Symptoms of Pancreatitis?**

#### **For acute pancreatitis:**

Sudden, intense pain in the middle of the abdomen, usually 12 to 24 hours after a large meal or a bout of heavy drinking. The pain may radiate to your back.

Fever, Nausea or vomiting

Clammy skin

Abdominal distention and tenderness

Rapid pulse

#### **For chronic pancreatitis:**

Intense, long-lasting abdominal pain that may radiate to the back and chest; the pain may be persistent or intermittent

Excessively foul, bulky stools

Nausea or vomiting

Weight loss due to malabsorption of food

Abdominal distention

Development of diabetes

**Call Your Doctor If:**

You think you may have pancreatitis. Patients with acute pancreatitis must have professional care to avoid serious, possibly life-threatening complications. Chronic pancreatitis also requires professional evaluation and treatment.

You continue to lose weight after treatment for pancreatitis; you may have a complication that prevents the body from digesting food properly.

You are pale, cold, clammy, have a rapid heartbeat or are breathing rapidly; you may be in shock and need emergency care.

**How Do I Know If I Have It?**

Your doctor will probably press on your abdominal area to see if it is tender and check you for low blood pressure, low-grade fever, and rapid pulse. You will have blood tests and possibly X-rays, Ultrasound tests or CT scans.

To diagnose chronic pancreatitis, your doctor will take blood samples and check your stool for excess fat. You may be given a stimulation test called a pancreatic function test to see how well your pancreas releases its digestive enzymes. You may also be screened for diabetes.

**What Are the Treatments?**

Pancreatitis is treated with drugs, diet, and surgery. If you have an attack of acute pancreatitis, your doctor will not want you to eat food. You will be given fluids and nutrients intravenously.

You may receive strong medicines for pain. You may have to have your stomach drained with a tube placed through your nose.

If your pancreatitis is caused by gallstones or an obstructed pancreatic duct, you may need surgery.

If you have chronic pancreatitis, your doctor will focus on treating you for pain and for complications that affect your digestive abilities. You may be placed on an enzyme replacement therapy to restore your digestive tract's ability to digest nutrients; this will also likely reduce the frequency of new attacks.

You may have to avoid fatty foods and will have to abstain from drinking alcohol. If your pain does not respond to medication, the damaged pancreatic tissue may be surgically removed, but only as a last resort.

**How Can I Prevent It?**

Limiting yourself to one or two alcoholic drinks per day may significantly lessen your chances of developing pancreatitis. Once you have had pancreatitis, though, you should not drink at all; any drinking carries the risk of new attacks.

Controlling your weight and maintaining a healthful diet and lifestyle may prevent gallstones.