



## Pancreatitis

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# Pancreatitis

The **pancreas**, an organ located behind the stomach in the upper abdomen, produces enzymes and hormones. The enzymes are discharged through the **pancreatic duct** into the intestine, where they help digest food that has passed through the stomach. The hormones produced by the pancreas, including **insulin** and **glucagon**, are released into the blood and help regulate blood sugar levels. **Pancreatitis** is an inflammation of the pancreas. Pancreatitis is a severe illness with several forms. The June 16, 2004, issue of *JAMA* includes an article about pancreatitis.

## RISK FACTORS FOR PANCREATITIS

- Alcohol abuse
- Gallstones
- Abdominal trauma
- Major surgery
- Inherited diseases affecting the pancreas, including **cystic fibrosis**
- High blood levels of calcium (usually due to other medical problems)
- High blood levels of **triglycerides** (a particular type of fat in the blood)

## ACUTE PANCREATITIS

Acute pancreatitis typically causes severe abdominal pain, often associated with nausea and vomiting. Because pancreatitis can be severe and life-threatening, antibiotics and hospital care may be required. In severe cases of acute pancreatitis, shock may occur, requiring intensive care and supportive therapy.

## GALLSTONE PANCREATITIS

Gallstone pancreatitis is caused by irritation of the pancreas by gallstones in the pancreatic duct. **Jaundice** (yellowing of the skin) may occur with this type of pancreatitis. **Cholecystectomy** (surgical removal of the gallbladder) is necessary to prevent gallstone pancreatitis from occurring again. Because acute gallstone pancreatitis may be a severe illness, several days of supportive care (which may include antibiotics and intravenous fluids in the hospital) may be required before a person is ready to have the gallbladder removed.

## CHRONIC PANCREATITIS

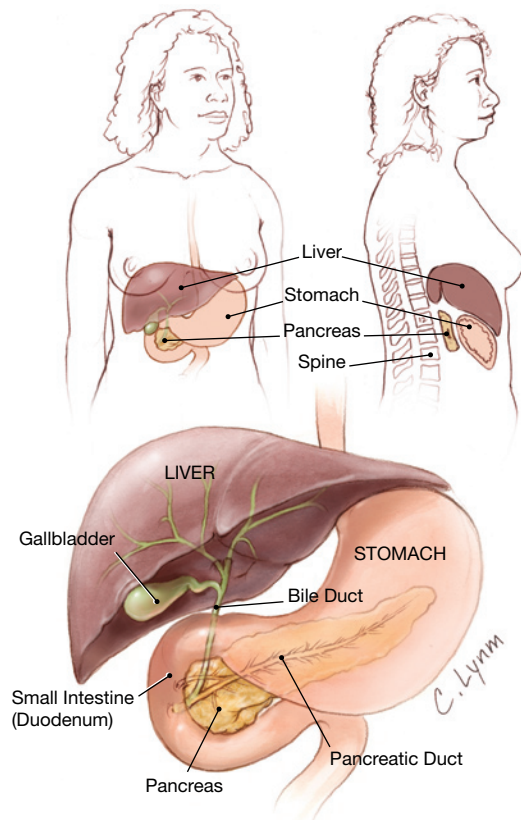
Chronic pancreatitis is inflammation and scarring of the pancreas that occurs over a long period. Heavy alcohol use is a common cause. Persons with chronic pancreatitis may have abdominal pain that is either constant or **episodic** (comes and goes). Scarring of the pancreas may lead to failure to produce enough enzymes to digest food and a lack of insulin leading to diabetes. Persons who have acute or chronic pancreatitis may develop a complication called a **pseudocyst**. This is a fluid collection in or around the pancreas. It may push on or cause pressure on other abdominal organs, creating other symptoms. These pseudocysts can also become infected, causing serious illness.

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Sources: American Gastroenterological Association, National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, National Pancreas Foundation

