

WHY **CANCER** OF THE PANCREAS IS SO LETHAL

A good friend of mine died of cancer of the pancreas last week, less than a year after he was diagnosed with the disease. Why is cancer of the pancreas very deadly? Where is the pancreas, what does it do? How can we prevent this cancer? —genalyn31@gmail.com

Cancer of the pancreas is indeed one of the deadliest forms of cancer. The disease, which is more common among men than women, and among people who are over 60 years old, is actually a relatively rare malignancy. Worldwide, it is only the 11th most common cancer, yet it is the seventh leading cause of cancer deaths annually. Even with the best treatment, most pancreatic cancer patients succumb to metastases and other complications of their illness, and only five to seven percent survive more than five years from the time of diagnosis, and very few cures have been recorded.



MEDICAL NOTES
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Cancer of the pancreas is very lethal because it spreads very quickly and is often diagnosed at an advanced stage.

Cancer of the pancreas is often detected late

Cancer of the pancreas is generally diagnosed late because, in its early stages, when it is most curable, it has no signs and symptoms. Its initial symptoms, which generally manifest when the tumor is already large and has spread, are nonspecific, consisting of mild, vague, and diffused abdominal pain that may radiate to the back, loss of appetite, and weight loss. Other frequent but late manifestations include yellowing of the skin (jaundice), itching, nausea and vomiting, fatigue, and depression. Occasionally, also during the late stages of the illness, a hard, fixed mass is palpable in the abdomen.

After signs and symptoms have appeared, however, pancreatic can-



cer is fairly easy to diagnose. Unfortunately, by this time, it is invariably too late to cure it. The diagnostic procedures that can detect cancer of the pancreas singly or in combination include ultrasound imaging, MRI, CT scanning, and endoscopic and laparoscopic examinations.

Another reason why pancreatic cancer is not detected early is that, at present, there is still no reliable screening test available for early detection of the disease.

What the pancreas is all about

The pancreas (“*lapay*”, in Filipino) is a thin, flattened organ that lies behind the stomach. It is only about six inches long. It consists of a wide end (head) that adheres to the first part of the small intestine, a tapering other end (tail) that touches the spleen, and a body (the part between head and tail) that forms the bulk of the organ.

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Treatment of pancreatic cancer

If the pancreatic cancer is detected while still confined to the pancreas, surgical removal can lead to a cure. If the mass has already spread to surrounding tissues or other organs, however, surgery is no longer curative, but it is still sometimes done for palliative reasons, e.g., to relieve obstruction to the flow of bile. To improve the patient’s quality of life, radiotherapy (x-ray treatment) and chemotherapy (drug treatment) are also used.

Causes of cancer of the pancreas

We do not know yet what causes pancreatic cancer. But we have already identified some risk factors associated with the disease, such as smoking, increasing age (especially over age 60), a diet rich in meat and fat, long-standing diabetes, chronic pancreatitis, occupational exposure to petroleum and certain other compounds, family history of pancreatic cancer, and family history of genetic syndromes that increase cancer risk.

How to decrease your risk for pancreatic cancer

Inasmuch as its cause is unknown, there is no proven measure that can prevent cancer of the pancreas. But you can reduce your chance of developing the malignancy if you follow these imperatives that will reduce your risk for the disease: do not smoke, exercise regularly, maintain a desirable body weight, and adhere to a diet that is low in fat and meat but high in fruits and vegetables. And if you have diabetes, control it with diet, exercise, and prescribed medications.

Note: Email inquiries on health matters to: medical_notes2@yahoo.com