

Adventist Healthcare: Health Tip of the Week

Pancreatic Cancer

Although pancreatic cancer accounts for only two percent of new cancer cases in the U.S., it is the fourth leading cause of all cancer deaths.

The pancreas lies horizontally behind the lower part of the stomach, next to the small intestine. It functions as two separate organs by secreting enzymes that aid digestion and producing hormones that help regulate the metabolism of carbohydrates.

Pancreatic cancer spreads rapidly and is seldom detected in early stages.

- Early tumors cannot be seen or felt by healthcare providers during routine physical examinations.
- A substance called CA 19-9 is present in cancer cells of the pancreas and is released into the blood by these cells. By the time blood levels are high enough to be detected in tests, consistently, the cancer is no longer in its early stages.

Symptoms

- Patients usually have no symptoms until the cancer has reached a large size or has spread to other organs.
- The symptoms include: yellowing of the skin and whites of eyes (jaundice), abdominal pain, weight loss, nausea, weakness, pain in the upper abdomen and loss of appetite.

Risk Factors

- Usually, pancreatic cancer strikes after the age of 50 and is more commonly diagnosed in men.
- Aside from advanced age, smoking is the main risk factor. A smoker is 3-4 times more likely than a nonsmoker to acquire the disease.
- Excessive dietary fat and protein as well as low fiber intake may promote the disease.
- 10-20 percent of patients diagnosed with pancreatic cancer also have diabetes.
- As many as 10 percent of pancreatic cancers are thought to result from inherited factors and be transmitted by genes.

Sources: NIH, American Cancer Society, National Pancreas Foundation, and Washington and Shady Grove Adventist Hospitals. The Health Tip of the Week is for educational purposes only. For additional information, consult your physician. Please feel free to copy and distribute this health resource.