

Pancreatic Cancer

WHAT IS PANCREATIC CANCER? Pancreatic cancer is a devastating disease with one of the lowest survival rates in oncology. Statistics show only around 7% of those diagnosed in Australia will survive 5 years post diagnosis.¹

This cancer occurs when malignant cells develop in the pancreas, which is an elongated gland hidden deep in the abdomen behind the stomach and is a vital part of the digestive system. Pancreatic cancer rarely occurs in people aged under 40.¹ The pancreas has both an *exocrine* and *endocrine* function. The exocrine function of the pancreas involves the production and secretion of pancreatic juice and digestive enzymes into the duodenum. Exocrine cells make up the majority of the pancreas. The endocrine function of the pancreas involves the production and secretion of insulin, glucagon and somatostatin. Endocrine cells make up only 1% -2% of the pancreas.

TYPES OF PANCREATIC CANCER

There are two types of pancreatic tumours – Exocrine Tumours and Neuroendocrine Tumours.

Exocrine tumours make up more than 90% of pancreatic tumours², the most common being *adenocarcinoma*, which begins in the lining of the pancreatic ducts. Other types of exocrine tumours include adenocarcinomas and undifferentiated carcinomas.

More rare are neuroendocrine tumours, which account for less than 5% of all pancreatic tumours.^{2,3} They arise in the pancreas' hormone producing cells and are generally less aggressive than pancreatic adenocarcinoma.³

CAUSES AND RISK FACTORS

While the causes of pancreatic cancer are not known, risk factors have been identified and include:²

- smoking
- age (it occurs mostly in people over the age of 65)

- new onset Type 2 diabetes
- a family history of pancreatic, ovarian or colon cancer
- chronic pancreatitis
- gastrectomy

SYMPTOMS

Often signs and symptoms of pancreatic cancer may not appear until the disease is advanced and when nearby organs are affected.

The most common symptoms of exocrine pancreatic cancer are:¹

- jaundice (yellowing of the eyes and skin); this may be associated with dark urine, light-coloured stools (bowel motions) and itchy skin
- pain in the abdomen or back
- weight loss and loss of appetite
- pale and greasy stools
- nausea and vomiting
- fatigue (tiredness)
- enlargement of the gallbladder
- blood clot in the leg

Endocrine pancreatic cancers cause different symptoms depending on the type of hormone-producing cell involved.¹

EPIDEMIOLOGY AND PROGNOSIS

It is estimated that 3,123 Australians will be diagnosed with pancreatic cancer this year, with more men than women expected to be affected.¹ Further, the risk of being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer by age 85 is put at 1 in 65.¹

Latest data shows that between 2008 - 2012 in Australia, people diagnosed with pancreatic cancer had a 7% chance of surviving for five years, compared to the general population.⁴

TREATMENT

Treatment for pancreatic cancer depends on the stage of the disease, the location of the cancer and the severity of symptoms.¹

For early stage disease, surgery is the most common initial treatment, followed by chemotherapy either with or without radiotherapy. Advanced pancreatic cancer is usually treated with chemotherapy.

PANCREATIC CANCER OUTLOOK



DR ANDREW DEAN

“The outlook for pancreatic cancer has changed enormously over the last seven years, thanks largely to nanotechnology that has enabled improved drug delivery. These days, patients can expect survival times of years, rather than months.

The issue with pancreatic cancer is that we never really had drugs that worked very well.

Yes, it is still most often diagnosed at a late stage. Any cancer that doesn't have a screening program – like lung cancer, ovarian cancer, pancreatic cancer, gall bladder cancer – will be diagnosed later.

In terms of the future of pancreatic cancer treatment, I think it will be very interesting to see whether immunotherapy fulfils our initial hopes and expectations, in terms of being able to alter the prognosis for patients with pancreatic cancer. We await the results of key trials with great interest.”

Dr Andrew Dean is an Australian medical oncologist and expert in pancreatic cancer.



Meet Linda

59 year old Linda Wilson was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in June 2012. This is her story.

“ I am a wife, mother of three, grandmother of five and a registered nurse. I am also a fishing fanatic! I love fishing from my kayak.

Back in 2012, I had some slight discomfort in my upper left abdomen and some heartburn. I was just not feeling quite right. A visit to my local doctor was in order and I was advised there was probably nothing to worry about. I wasn't convinced, so I was given a referral for an abdominal ultrasound, although I was told I probably did not need it.

I went and had the ultrasound and that's where it started. I had something on my pancreas. A CT scan was promptly ordered and within two days I was booked to see a surgeon. I had blood tests and a PET scan and these confirmed I had pancreatic cancer.

My first thoughts were, 'How long do I have to share my life with my wonderful family?'

My youngest son was studying medicine and I wondered if I would live to see him graduate.

I made a promise to myself that I was not going to waste one minute of the rest of my life being miserable.

I underwent a distal pancreatectomy and a splenectomy, which took away the bottom half of my pancreas leaving the pancreatic head in place.

In the section that doctors removed, there was a three centimetre tumour with no lymph node involvement. These were positive results and I went on to have six months of chemotherapy. In follow up scans soon after this, my tumour markers were all clear and life looked promising.

Then, a few months later my tumour markers started going up and a lymph node lit up on a scan. I had to know what this meant, so I asked doctors how long I had left to live. I was reluctantly told I had between six and twelve months if I was lucky.

So around the middle of 2013 I commenced a new type of chemotherapy. It was time to use some of my super and enjoy some fun times with my family and friends. I had always wanted to visit Kakadu so I went there, and I have had some fun fishing trips chasing that elusive Barramundi. (It's still elusive!)

I had been on my treatment for some time, but at the end of 2014 my white blood cell counts were low. Also, my tumour markers were rising. It was at this time that I was advised at a visit to the oncology clinic that my treatment was being stopped.

When I asked why, I was told it was because I was not considered curable.



Linda (centre) with her family.

After further discussions including another oncologist, I recommenced chemotherapy with injections to help my blood cell counts recover. I was advised it was time to change to another chemotherapy.

I had tolerated the chemo well. My tumour markers would rise if I had a break in treatment, which was occasionally necessary to enjoy some holiday time.

After a visit with an oncologist in December 2015, blood tests and scans were ordered which came back clear. But each time treatment stopped my tumour markers would start to rise. I was referred to a radiation oncologist and in January 2016 commenced 30 rounds of radiation therapy to the lymph node area that lit up in 2013.

It is now four years since diagnosis. If I get to five years, I will be one of the few people diagnosed with pancreatic cancer who survive five years.

I consider that I am living with pancreatic cancer, not dying from it.

Hardly an hour goes by that I don't think about it. I have been able to stay positive. These days, if someone asks me if I would like to go and do something, I do it. There is no time to waste, we are all terminal from the moment we are born.

And you know that son who was studying medicine? He is in his third year post graduation! And I have seen another grandchild born. There have been some beautiful moments I am so grateful for. ”

Linda Wilson's scans are currently clear and she remains in remission.

* Linda shared her story in July 2016.

REFERENCES

- 1 <https://pancreatic-cancer.canceraustralia.gov.au/>; Last Accessed July 2016
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- 3 <https://www.pancan.org/>; Last Accessed March 2017
- 4 <http://www.aihw.gov.au/>; Last Accessed July 2016



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