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**Understanding
Pancreatic Cancer**

What is Pancreatic Cancer?

Pancreatic Cancer occurs when cells in the pancreas mutate and multiply uncontrollably, resulting in a tumour. Pancreas is a gland that produces hormones which regulate blood sugar levels and enzymes that aid in digestion. Most Pancreatic Cancers start in the pancreatic ducts.

Types

- **Endocrine Tumours:** Endocrine tumours start in the endocrine pancreas. They are also called Pancreatic Neuroendocrine Tumours (PNETS). Insulinomas and Gastrinomas are common Endocrine Tumours of Pancreas
- **Exocrine Tumours:** The most common type of Pancreatic Cancer is Adenocarcinoma, which begins in the cells that line the organs
- **Neuroendocrine Tumours:** Less than 10% of Pancreatic Tumours are Neuroendocrine Tumours. It is also known as Islet Cell Carcinoma
- **Cystic Neoplasms of Pancreas:** Formation of a cyst or a fluid filled sac in the pancreas. Some cystic tumours can turn into cancerous (malignant) tumours. Intraductal Papillary Mucinous Neoplasms (IPMN), Pseudopapillary Neoplasm and Mucinous Cystic Neoplasms are some common Cystic Neoplasms of Pancreas

Symptoms

Pancreatic Cancer may not have any early signs but its symptoms are typically detected when the tumour starts affecting other organs in the digestive system. Some common symptoms include:

- Upper abdominal pain
- Middle back pain
- Fatigue
- Nausea and Vomiting
- Lack of Appetite
- Weight loss

Causes & Risk Factors

Pancreatic Cancer occurs when pancreatic cells develop changes in their DNA. The occurrence of these changes causes the cancer cells to multiply rapidly, leading to the formation of a tumour. The tumour can grow to invade and destroy healthy tissue. Over time, cancer cells break away and spread to other parts of the body (metastasis).

Some common Pancreatic Cancer risk factors may include:

- **Smoking:** Consumption of cigarettes, cigars and other forms of tobacco
- **Obesity:** Particularly the extra weight around the waist
- **Diabetes:** Especially Type 2 Diabetes. Sudden onset of Diabetes could be a sign of Pancreatic Cancer

- **Chemical Exposure:** Certain chemicals like pesticides and petrochemicals
- **Chronic Pancreatitis:** Long-term inflammation of the pancreas

Diagnosis

It is difficult to detect Pancreatic Cancer in the early stages as the tumour is not easily visible in routine imaging tests. If the healthcare provider suspects Pancreatic Cancer, they recommend a combination of tests, which may include a CT, MRI and PET Scan, Endoscopic Ultrasound and Blood tests. A Pancreatic Blood Test can detect tumour markers, a substance that may indicate the presence of Cancer.

Treatment

Treatment options that may be considered include surgery, chemotherapy and sometimes radiotherapy.

Laparoscopic & Robotic Cancer Surgery: Surgery can be performed laparoscopically to successfully treat Pancreatic Cancer. The cancer must be completely confined to the pancreas to perform the surgery. **Laparoscopic Whipple's procedure** may be performed, depending on the location and size of the tumour.

Chemotherapy: Chemotherapy uses drugs that kill cancer cells.

Radiation Therapy: Radiation therapy uses high-energy rays to kill cancer cells.

Targeted Therapy: This treatment uses drugs that target certain proteins. These proteins control how cancer cells grow and spread.

Pain Management: Pancreatic cancer can be very painful as it may affect the nearby nerves. The healthcare provider can help manage the pain with oral medications, anaesthesia or steroid injections.

Treatment of Pancreatic Cancer depends on certain factors, which include:

- Exact location of the tumour
- Tumour Stage
- Overall health of the patient
- Metastatic stage of cancer

Prevention

- Avoid smoking
- Limit alcohol intake
- Eat plenty of fresh fruits, vegetables and whole grains
- Reduce intake of red meat, sugary drinks and processed foods
- Maintain a healthy weight

When to seek medical attention

If one starts to develop severe and persistent pain in the upper abdomen, immediately consult a healthcare provider for guidance and seek appropriate care with Pancreatic Cancer screening for early detection.