Acute Pancreatitis

What Is Acute Pancreatitis?

The pancreas is a gland about the size of a hand that is located behind the stomach. It makes digestive fluid that helps to break down food. Acute pancreatitis happens when something blocks the flow of this fluid or attacks the tissues of the pancreas. The pancreas becomes irritated and swollen. Factors that increase the risk for acute pancreatitis include:

- Having gallstone disease
- Drinking a lot of alcohol
- Taking certain medicines
- Having high levels of fat in your blood
- Injuring your pancreas in an accident or with surgery
- Having pancreas problems since birth

What Are the Warning Signs of Acute Pancreatitis?

- Severe, constant pain in your upper abdomen that may spread to your back
- Stomach pain that gets worse after eating
- Nausea and vomiting
- Sweating
- Fever

How Is Acute Pancreatitis Diagnosed?

- Your doctor will give you a physical exam and review any medicines you take. He or she will also ask about any factors that may put you at risk for acute pancreatitis.
- Blood tests will check for signs of pancreatitis.
- Imaging tests, such as X-ray, ultrasound, or CT scan, may be used to look at your pancreas and check for causes of acute pancreatitis.

How Is Acute Pancreatitis Treated?

- Many patients with acute pancreatitis need to be hospitalized. Most people feel better within a week and can leave the hospital. Recovery may take longer in more serious cases.
- While in the hospital, you may need to stop eating for a few days while your pancreas gets better.
- Your doctor may give you medicines to help with your pain. Fluids will be given through your veins to keep you hydrated.
- You may need treatment for what is causing the problem, such as surgery to remove a gallstone.
- After an episode of acute pancreatitis, it is important to stay away from anything that can cause another episode. This means staying away from alcohol, certain medicines, and fatty foods.

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Questions for My Doctor

- What caused my acute pancreatitis?
- What kinds of tests do I need?
- Will it go away?
- How long will I need to be in the hospital?
- If I have had acute pancreatitis, how can I prevent it from coming back?
- What foods and drinks should I stay away from?

Bottom Line

- The pancreas makes fluid that helps to digest food. Acute pancreatitis happens when something blocks the flow of this fluid or attacks the tissues of the pancreas.
- Common symptoms include severe stomach pain, nausea and vomiting, sweating, and fever.
- Many patients with acute pancreatitis need to be hospitalized.
- Treatment includes: stopping eating for a few days to rest the pancreas, medicine to help with pain, and fluids given through your veins to keep you hydrated. Some people may need surgery to fix what is causing their symptoms.
- Acute pancreatitis usually goes away in about a week.

For More Information

- **MedlinePlus:** www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/000287.htm
- **American College of Gastroenterology:** http://patients.gi.org/topics/pancreatitis-acute-and-chronic/
- **National Pancreas Foundation:** www.pancreasfoundation.org/patient-information/acute-pancreatitis/

Notes:

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