



Section Six: Managing pancreatic cancer symptoms

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Te whakahaere i ngā
tohumate matepukupuku
repetaiaki huka

Key points:

- Pancreatic cancer can cause problems with digestion, weight loss, fatigue (no energy), and pain. You may have jaundice (yellowing of the skin), which is caused by a high level of bilirubin in the liver and blood.
- Your treatment team may recommend options to reduce the symptoms of the cancer and improve your quality of life. These may include:
 - dietary changes
 - the use of prescription medications
 - procedures such as inserting a stent or having bypass surgery (to reduce jaundice)
 - complementary therapies.
- Talk to your treatment team about any symptoms you may be experiencing. As well as providing cancer treatments, they may be able to refer you to a palliative care service to help you manage the cancer symptoms.

Ngā kōrero matua:

- Tērā pea ka puta he raruraru ki te pūnaha nakunaku nā te matepukupuku repetaiaki, te ngaronga taumaha, te māuiui, me te mamae. Tērā pea ka puta te huhunu, (ka kowhai te kiri), nā runga i te kaha piki o te bilirubin i roto i te ate me te toto.
- Tērā pea ka taunaki tō rōpū maimoa i ngā kōwhiringa hei āwhina ki te whakaheke i ngā tohumate me te whakapai ake i tō toioranga. Tērā pea ko ētahi o ēnei:
 - whakarerekētanga rārangi kai
 - te whakamahi rongoā whakahaunga
 - manatūnga pērā ki te whakauru ngongo roa, te whai hāparapara ara karo (hei whakaiti i te huhunu)
 - ngā haumanu tautoko.
- Kōrero ki tō rōpū maimoa e pā ana ki ngā tohumate tērā pea kai te rongo koe. I tua atu i te hoatu maimoa matepukupuku, tērā pea ka āhei rātou ki te tonono i a koe ki tētahi ratonga atawhai taurima ki te āwhina i a koe ki te whakahaere i ngā tohumate matepukupuku.

Ways of managing pancreatic cancer symptoms

Talk to your treatment team about any symptoms you may be experiencing. As well as providing cancer treatments, your doctor may be able to refer you to a palliative care service to help you manage the cancer symptoms.

Pain

Not everyone with pancreatic cancer has pain. If you do have pain, you may not be in pain all the time and it can usually be well managed.

There is a range of prescription medications and complementary therapies to help with pain caused by pancreatic cancer.

Pain-relief medication works best when it is taken regularly. Tell your treatment team if your prescribed medications are not easing your pain, as there are likely to be other pain-relieving medications you can try.

Radiation treatment and chemotherapy can also be used to treat pain caused by cancer. Many people find a combination of more than one treatment helps, and it may take a little time to find the most effective pain control for you.

Fatigue (no energy)

Fatigue can be described in many ways, including feeling exhausted, extremely tired, sleepy, or drowsy, or finding it difficult to concentrate. Fatigue can appear suddenly and rest may not help. Here are some ideas to help you cope with fatigue:

- Let people help you. Whānau, friends, and neighbours may offer to help with tasks such as shopping, childcare, housework, and driving.
- Take a few weeks off work during or after treatment, or work fewer hours. You may be able to work from home.
- Do light exercise such as walking, and keep up your normal exercise routine if approved by your GP or whānau doctor. Do not start any new exercise routine until you feel better after treatment.
- Try to eat a healthy, well-balanced diet. Some people find small, frequent snacks more appealing than meals. If you have nausea, have your meals when you feel like eating.
- Fatigue may be caused by specific things that can be found in blood tests and may be improved by treatment.

Jaundice

Understanding jaundice

Jaundice is caused by a high level of bilirubin in your liver and blood.

Bilirubin is made when old red blood cells break down. Usually it is processed in the liver, where it is mixed into bile. The bile goes from the liver through the bile duct and into the small intestine, where it helps to digest the food we eat.

If pancreatic cancer blocks the bile duct, the bilirubin (in the bile) cannot leave the liver. This causes the levels of bilirubin in your liver and blood to rise, and this in turn causes the symptoms of jaundice.

Bilirubin is often yellow in colour. This is why when the level of bilirubin in your blood is high, your skin and the whites of your eyes often look yellow.

Common symptoms of jaundice include:

- yellow-coloured skin
- yellow-coloured whites of your eyes
- itchy skin
- pale or white-coloured poo (faeces)
- dark-coloured pee (urine)
- pain in your tummy (abdomen)

Treating jaundice

Your treatment team may recommend a procedure, such as a stent or bypass surgery, to restore the flow of bile and help reduce the symptoms of jaundice (see page 28).

Coping with itchy skin

Some people with jaundice experience itchy skin, which is caused by high levels of bilirubin in the skin. If you are experiencing this, you might find some of the following suggestions useful.

- Wash in warm water instead of hot water.
- Place cool, damp cloths on your skin.
- Use unperfumed soaps, soap substitutes, and moisturisers.
- Pat your skin dry with a soft towel instead of rubbing.
- Wash clothing and bedding in mild (hypoallergenic) detergents.
- Wear loose-fitting clothing made from natural fibres such as cotton. These do not irritate the skin as much as synthetic materials like nylon do.
- Keep your fingernails short and clean (to prevent infection if scratching breaks the skin).
- Talk to your treatment team about medications to help relieve the itching.

Trouble sleeping

Some people with pancreatic cancer have trouble sleeping or have problems falling asleep, which can affect how well they feel during the day. If you are in pain, this may also affect your sleep.

If you are having difficulty sleeping, these ideas may help.

- Try to wake up at the same time each day and go to bed at the same time each night.
- Create a quiet, dark, and restful place for sleeping. Sleeping in a more upright position or in a recliner chair may be useful if lying flat makes you feel breathless or causes you to start coughing.
- Reduce caffeinated drinks like tea and coffee, soft drinks, and alcohol. These may give you energy but leave you unable to sleep.
- Use your pain medication as prescribed if pain is keeping you awake.



You can find more information in our information sheet, *If you have difficulty sleeping*, available on our website: www.cancer.org.nz/sleep-problems

Nausea (feeling sick)

If you have pancreatic cancer it is common to feel sick at some point. This can be caused by many things, including the cancer itself and cancer treatments.

People have found the following suggestions helpful.

- Try to eat small meals at frequent intervals.
- Avoid fatty and fried foods.
- Rest before and after eating.
- Do not lie flat during or after eating.
- Drink plenty of fluids.
- See a dietitian or nurse for dietary advice.
- Try relaxation or mindfulness exercises.
- Do something enjoyable as a distraction from feeling sick.

Anti-sickness medications work in a range of ways, depending on the cause of your nausea. Let your GP or whānau doctor know if you feel sick or if the medication you are using is not working – there may be something else you can try.



You can find more information on nausea on our website:
www.cancer.org.nz/eating-well-with-cancer

Weight changes

It is important to try to maintain your weight and eat well during and after treatment for pancreatic cancer. Eating small, frequent meals high in energy (calories), fat, carbohydrates (sugars), and protein may help you maintain a stable weight.

To help maintain your weight, you could try:

- eating nourishing foods that are high in energy and protein, such as poultry, fish, meat, eggs, tofu, legumes, dairy products, nuts, and seeds
- eating the most nourishing part of a meal first
- taking advantage of times when your appetite is the best. This might mean having a larger meal in the morning and smaller snacks or meals during the rest of the day.

If you have tried increasing your energy intake but still struggle to eat enough, you may benefit from a nutritional supplement drink or pancreatic enzyme replacement therapy (PERT) (see page 43). Talk with a dietitian or your treatment team about the right supplements for your needs.



You can find more information about managing weight on our website:
www.cancer.org.nz/managing-your-weight

Problems with digestion

Many people with cancer of the pancreas have problems with digestion. The pancreas makes enzymes that help to break down (digest) the food you eat. Nutrients from the food are then absorbed into the blood and used by the body for energy. Pancreatic cancer, and surgery to remove the cancer, can reduce the amount of enzymes made by the pancreas.

Without enough pancreatic enzymes in your body, the food you eat cannot be digested or absorbed properly (malabsorption). Common symptoms include:

- loss of appetite
- weight loss
- bloating and farting (wind)
- loose poo (diarrhoea)
- poo that floats and smells bad
- pain after eating.

These digestion problems can be managed by medication that replace the enzymes your pancreas would normally make. This is called pancreatic enzyme replacement therapy (PERT).

Pancreatic enzyme replacement therapy (PERT)

PERT is the use of medication to replace the enzymes that your pancreas is not making. Taking this medication can help to manage the symptoms caused by digestion problems. The replacement enzymes are normally given as capsules, which you swallow with food.

The dose of enzymes you need will depend on the type and amount of food you are eating. It is important to make sure that your treatment team includes a dietician. They will help you to understand how PERT works and support you in balancing the amount of food you eat and the dose of enzymes you need to manage your symptoms.

When you start using PERT, you may find it helpful to keep a diary of what you eat, the enzyme doses you take, and if it reduces your symptoms. This can help you work out if you are taking enough enzymes.

All PERT enzymes are made from pork products. Talk to your treatment team if you are a vegetarian or follow a religion that avoids pork products. Many organisations representing these communities have said these treatments are acceptable to use as there is no alternative.



You can find more information on PERT on this website:

https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/0424/0949/2641/files/210429PC01_PCUK_PERT_Factsheet_RGB_Web.pdf?v=1621341525