

# Acute pancreatitis

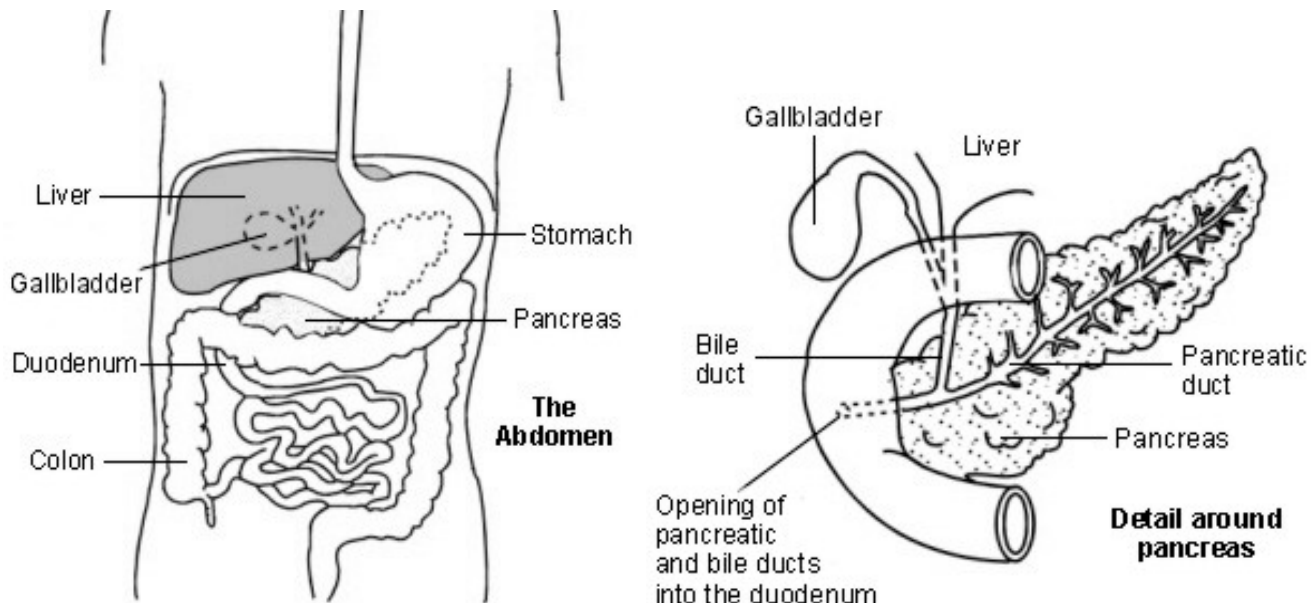
This leaflet explains about acute pancreatitis. If you have any further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact your nurse or doctor.

## What is acute pancreatitis and why do I have it?

Pancreatitis is inflammation of the pancreas gland. The pancreas is a digestive gland underneath the stomach. The commonest causes of pancreatitis are gallstones or alcohol but there are many other less common causes. In about two in 10 cases we never find the cause.

## The pancreas

The pancreas produces juices involved in digestion that travel down a tube called the pancreatic duct. This joins the tube from the liver and gall bladder called the bile duct and they empty into the intestine together. Gallstones can block this tube and the back pressure causes inflammation. Alcohol can also cause the inflammation; we don't know why some people are more sensitive to alcohol in this way. The pancreas also produces insulin and severe pancreatitis can in some cases result in diabetes.



Used with permission from Patient available at <http://patient.info/health/acute-pancreatitis-leaflet> Egton Medical Information systems Limited. All Rights Reserved.

## What are the signs and symptoms?

Acute pancreatitis typically causes severe pain at the top of the abdomen. Sometimes the pain spreads to the back.

## Do I need any tests to confirm the diagnosis?

Pancreatitis is usually diagnosed by a blood test called 'Amylase' which is an enzyme (a natural chemical needed to digest food) produced by the pancreas. In some cases the amylase level isn't very high and then pancreatitis is diagnosed by a CT scan.

Pancreatitis often settles down in a few days but in one out of five cases it can be severe and a life-threatening condition. It is not always obvious initially whether a patient has mild or severe acute pancreatitis. We do several blood tests to try to predict which cases are mild and which might be severe. The level of the amylase blood test does not predict if the attack is severe.

## What treatments are available?

In **mild pancreatitis**, the treatment means you will be admitted into hospital for a few days and involves an intravenous fluid drip, painkillers and observation. We might advise a tube in your nose into your stomach (nasogastric tube) and a urinary catheter into your bladder to carefully measure how much urine you make.

We will also request tests to find the cause of pancreatitis. This usually involves an ultrasound scan and sometimes an MRI scan of your abdomen. Some patients need a special procedure to examine and clear the tubes from the pancreas and gall bladder; this procedure is called an Endoscopic Retrograde Cholangio Pancreatogram (ERCP).

If gallstones are found, an operation to remove the gall bladder is usually recommended and this will be discussed with you in more detail. This may be done during the same admission or soon after. Patients with less severe pancreatitis usually stay in hospital for a few days and recover completely.

Patients with **severe pancreatitis** will also be admitted into hospital for treatment. Severe pancreatic is a life threatening condition, which may result in organ failure, so patients will be treated in the high dependency unit (HDU) or intensive care unit (ICU) for organ support as they may have problems with breathing, kidney function or low blood pressure. They may need multiple scans and drainage tubes put into the pancreas with X-Ray guidance. Rarely, they may need an operation to remove the damaged pancreas. Patients with severe pancreatitis can be in hospital for many days, weeks or even months depending on how bad the inflammation and effects on other organs are.

## What happens next?

For gallstone pancreatitis, an operation to remove the gallbladder hopes to prevent pancreatitis from returning. We try to do this operation as soon as possible in less severe pancreatitis. In severe pancreatitis we usually wait a few weeks for the inflammation to settle down before we operate.

When pancreatitis is caused by alcohol, stopping drinking reduces the chance of further pancreatitis which may be more severe in the future. We recommend that you don't alcohol for several months after having severe pancreatitis, even if alcohol was not the cause.

When the cause is not obvious, you will need to be seen in outpatients clinic and have some tests to find if there is another cause we can treat to prevent another pancreatitis attack.

Some people get further attacks of acute pancreatitis which is called recurrent acute pancreatitis. If this happens, contact your GP or visit your local Accident and Emergency. A small number of people may develop chronic pancreatitis where the pancreas doesn't function well and bouts of pain occur.

## Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the ward you were discharged from:

Surgical Assessment unit (Alan Apley ward) 020 7188 8861  
Nightingale ward 020 7188 8865  
Northumberland ward 020 7188 8866  
Pain Ward 020 7188 8867

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit [www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets](http://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets)

## Useful sources of information

W: [www.patient.co.uk](http://www.patient.co.uk)

### Pharmacy Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

T: 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

### Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department.

T: 020 7188 8801 (PALS)      E: [pals@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@gstt.nhs.uk)  
T: 020 7188 3514 (complaints)      E: [complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk)

### Language and accessible support services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch:

T: 020 7188 8815      E: [languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk)

### NHS 111

Offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day.

T: 111

### NHS Choices

Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health.

W: [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

**Leaflet number: 4366/VER1**

Date published: March 2017

Review date: March 2020

© 2017 Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust