

Pancreatitis and HIV

What is pancreatitis?

Pancreatitis is **inflammation** (irritation) of a gland that sits in the middle of the belly behind the stomach. The pancreas does primarily two things: it produces enzymes that are dumped into the small intestine to help digest food and it produces insulin, a hormone that helps control the amount of sugar in the blood. This inflammation can be either acute (meaning just suddenly happening) or chronic (an ongoing problem).

What causes pancreatitis?

The two most common causes of pancreatitis are either **gallstones or alcohol abuse**. If someone develops stones in their gallbladder, they can have the stones leave the gallbladder through a duct (or tube) that runs through the pancreas. The stone can get stuck in the duct and cause inflammation of the pancreas. Heavy drinking of alcohol, either every day or as a binge, can also cause the pancreas to get irritated. This includes beer, wine, and liquor. High fats in the blood (**high triglycerides** over 1000) can also cause pancreatitis.

In infection, there can be other causes of pancreatitis. Some of the **medicines** used to fight HIV can cause pancreatitis; didanosine (ddI, Videx) is the one that does it most commonly (about 2-3% of the time) but lamivudine (3TC, Epivir, Epzicom, Combivir, Trizivir) and emtricitabine (FTC, Emtriva, Truvada) have also been reported to cause this problem. Some of the HIV medicines also cause the fats to build up in the blood that can then cause the pancreas to be inflamed. If someone has a very low CD4 cell (T-cell) count, they can also get infections in the pancreas, such as with **cytomegalovirus** (CMV), a virus that also infects the eyes and causes blindness, in the intestines and causes diarrhea, or in the mouth or esophagus and causes ulcers or painful sores.

When should I think I may have pancreatitis?

If you develop **pain in your belly**, especially if it is just above the belly button and shoots through to your back, you may have pancreatitis. Usually someone with pancreatitis may also develop an upset stomach, feeling like they want to throw up (**nausea**), as well as **diarrhea** if they cannot digest their foods very well. You can also have crampy pain throughout the belly. If you have these problems, you should contact your clinic or go to the emergency room.

What is the treatment for pancreatitis?

Good hydration (lots of fluids) and resting the pancreas are the major treatments. Often you may have to go several days with **eating little or no food** to rest your pancreas. If it is due to a gallstone, you may have to have surgery or a tube put inside you to remove the stone. If it is due to medicines or alcohol, the medicines will need to be changed or the **alcohol use would need to be stopped**. If it is due to high fats in the blood, you would need to start medicine to bring down the amount of fat as well as cut back on eating fatty foods.

If you have further questions, be sure to talk to your primary care provider or your health educator or nurse.



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