

# BASIC PANCREATIC CANCER VOCABULARY

PANCREATIC  
CANCER  
ACTION  
NETWORK

®

**This list is intended to help patients and their families understand common medical terms. It is not comprehensive, but should be used as a reference guide when gathering information about pancreatic cancer.**

**Adenocarcinoma:** The most common type of pancreatic cancer. It arises from the cells that line the pancreatic duct. These cells are responsible for producing enzymes for digestion.

**Adjuvant therapy:** A treatment given after surgery to remove the cancer. Adjuvant therapy may include chemotherapy, radiation therapy, hormone therapy, targeted therapy and/or immunotherapy.

**Ascites (pronounced ə-ˈsī-tēz):** Abnormal buildup of fluid in the abdominal cavity, generally related to cancer.

**Benign:** A term used to describe a tumor that is not cancerous. Benign tumors do not spread to nearby tissues or other parts of the body.

**Biomarker:** Measurable substance that can be found in the blood or tissue.

**Biomarker testing:** Analysis of a patient's tissue, usually tumor or blood, that tests for specific genetic mutations of biomarkers, which oncologists can use to determine if there are therapies to target that patient's tumor.

**Biopsy:** A procedure to remove tissue from the body for examination to determine whether cancer is present.

**Cancer cachexia (pronounced kə-kĕk'sē-ə):** A cancer-related condition marked by weight loss due to the body's improper use of calories and proteins. Cancer cachexia causes weakness and fatigue and may impair the body's response to treatment.

**Clinical trial:** A research study that examines new investigational treatments or new combinations of existing treatments. Clinical trials are the only way for researchers to determine whether investigational treatments are beneficial to people living with pancreatic cancer. They may also give patients the opportunity to receive a promising investigational drug or treatment.

**Diabetes:** A chronic disease that affects the body's ability to produce or properly use the hormone insulin. In type 1 diabetes, the pancreas does not produce insulin. In type 2 diabetes, the pancreas does not produce enough insulin or the body does not use it properly.

**Duodenum:** The first portion of the small intestine, located just below the stomach.

**Endocrine gland:** An organ that secretes hormones into the body through the bloodstream. The endocrine function of the pancreas is to produce insulin and glucagon, which work together to control blood sugar levels.

**Exocrine gland:** An organ that secretes substances, such as hormones, into the body through ducts. The exocrine function of the pancreas is to produce enzymes that aid in the digestion of food.

**Gallbladder:** A small organ located below the liver. It stores bile made by the liver.

**Gastrointestinal:** A term indicating any part of the body in the digestive tract.

## HOW DO I CONTACT PATIENT CENTRAL?

Call **877-2-PANCAN** (toll free) or email [patientcentral@pancan.org](mailto:patientcentral@pancan.org). Patient Central is available Monday - Friday, 7 a.m. - 5 p.m., Pacific Time.

**Genetic testing:** Analysis of a person's tissue, usually saliva or blood, that tests for inherited mutations. This can be performed on patients with a diagnosis of pancreatic cancer or their family members. Information learned from genetic testing can help indicate treatment options for patients, as well as inform family members of the risk of developing pancreatic cancer.

**Jaundice:** A yellowing of the skin, whites of the eyes and mucous membranes caused by abnormally high levels of bilirubin in the blood. In pancreatic cancer, bile duct blockage causes most jaundice.

**Liver:** A large, glandular organ located in the upper abdomen. It cleanses the blood and secretes bile to help with digestion.

**Lymph nodes:** Small organs that filter harmful substances in the body. They contain immune cells that fight infections and other diseases. Lymph nodes are part of the lymph system, which is formed by the tissues and organs that produce, store and carry white blood cells that fight infections and diseases. This system includes the bone marrow, spleen, thymus, lymph nodes and lymphatic vessels.

**Malignant:** A term used to describe a tumor that is cancerous.

**Metastasis (metastasize):** The spread of cancer from one part of the body to a different organ.

**Neoadjuvant therapy:** A treatment given before surgery. Neoadjuvant therapy may include chemotherapy, radiation therapy, hormone therapy, targeted therapy and/or immunotherapy.

**Pancreas:** A long, irregularly shaped gland located behind the stomach. It produces enzymes that help with digestion and secretes hormones that control the levels of sugar in the blood.

**Pancreatic enzymes:** Proteins made by the pancreas that aid in food digestion. Lipase helps break down fats, amylase helps metabolize carbohydrates and protease helps metabolize proteins. Together these enzymes are commonly referred to as pancreatic juice.

**Pancreatic neuroendocrine tumors (PNETs):** Rare tumors that account for about 7 percent of all pancreatic tumors. These tumors develop from the abnormal growth of endocrine (hormone-producing) cells in the pancreas called islet cells.

**Precision medicine:** A field in cancer treatment that focuses on identifying specific treatments that may be more beneficial for an individual patient, based on their tumor's biology and inherited mutations. It can include genetic testing or biomarker testing of tumor tissue.

**Resectable:** Able to be removed by surgery.

**Small intestine:** The tube-shaped portion of the digestive (gastrointestinal) system, located between the stomach and the large intestine. Most nutrients are absorbed into the bloodstream through the small intestine.

**Spleen:** An organ in the upper left side of the abdomen that filters the blood. It is located near the tail of the pancreas.

**Stage:** A measure of how far the cancer has grown using size of the tumor, lymph node involvement and locations to which it has spread. Stages range from I to IV, with I describing the earliest form of cancer.

**Supportive (palliative) care:** A medical approach to care that serves to prevent, treat or eliminate symptoms and stress of serious illness, regardless of prognosis. Supportive care can accompany cancer-fighting treatments or be the focus of care.

**Whipple procedure:** The surgical removal of the head of the pancreas, the gallbladder, the duodenum, surrounding lymph nodes and sometimes a small portion of the lower stomach called the pylorus.