



Pancreatitis

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What is pancreatitis?

The pancreas is a gland located in the middle of the abdomen. It has two jobs:

- Produce hormones that regulate your blood sugars

- Produce enzymes that digest food ready for absorption

The enzymes are produced in an inactive form and travel out of the pancreas through a small duct into the intestine where they meet the food we eat and become active. In pancreatitis these enzymes become active within the pancreas itself, causing an inflammatory response. This can make you very unwell, and cause problems with other systems in the body such as the lungs and kidneys. Pancreatitis can range from very mild to life-threatening.

What causes pancreatitis?

There are many causes of pancreatitis, but the two most common causes in the UK are gallstones and alcohol.

Gallstones cause pancreatitis when they pass out of the gallbladder into the bile duct – this opens into the bowel at the same location as the pancreatic duct. The stone can either become stuck, blocking both ducts, or just irritate the duct as it passes – both of which can trigger pancreatitis.

Alcohol is thought to have a direct toxic effect on the pancreas, although exactly how this happens is not yet clear. This effect is worse if you also smoke.

Other rarer causes include:

- Trauma (eg after a direct blow to the abdomen)

- Some medications

- Certain viruses including mumps

- After a procedure called an ERCP (Endoscopic Retrograde Cholangio-Pancreatography)

