

# Pancreatitis

Pancreatitis has many possible causes, including injuries, infections, and other diseases. Acute pancreatitis causes abdominal pain, vomiting, and fever. Children with pancreatitis can become very ill quite rapidly and often need hospital treatment. As long as no other serious illness or injury is present, most children with pancreatitis recover in a few days.

## What is pancreatitis?

The pancreas is a small organ, located behind the stomach, with several important functions. It makes digestive juices and the hormone insulin, which allows the body to use sugar (glucose) for energy.

When the pancreas becomes infected or inflamed for any reason, the disease is called pancreatitis. Pancreatitis has many causes, any of which can make your child very ill. When pancreatitis occurs in children, it is usually “acute”; this means that the problem develops suddenly.

Many children with acute pancreatitis need hospital treatment to relieve pain and avoid dehydration. Most recover completely. Chronic pancreatitis, with repeated episodes of inflammation, is uncommon in children.

## What does it look like?

- Abdominal pain, which can become quite severe within a short time. Back pain may also be present. Pain may be so severe that your child doesn't want to move or be touched.
- Vomiting, which may be frequent or constant.
- Fever.
- Bulging or distended belly.
- Symptoms of dehydration (dry mouth, little or no urine produced, crying without tears) caused by vomiting and lack of fluids.
- In severe cases, shock, severe abdominal pain, and jaundice (yellow color of the skin).



If your child has any of these symptoms, get medical care as soon as possible.

## What causes pancreatitis?

There are many possible causes, including:

- Infections, usually caused by viruses. Common viral causes include coxsackievirus and influenza A virus.
- Injury, especially a hard blow to the abdomen (for example, from a car crash or child abuse).

- Stones or other causes of blockage in the pancreas.
- Certain genetic diseases (including cystic fibrosis).
- Drugs and toxic substances, including alcohol, acetaminophen, and many others.
- Pancreatitis can occur as a complication of other diseases, such as diabetes or kidney disease.

## What are some possible complications of pancreatitis?

- Dehydration, caused by severe vomiting and lack of fluids.
- Most other complications are related to the severity of the illness or injury causing pancreatitis.
- Rarely, pancreatitis in children becomes severe, causing potentially life-threatening complications such as bleeding or major infection.
- Chronic pancreatitis: repeated episodes of pancreatitis (uncommon in children).

## Can pancreatitis be prevented?

- Most causes of pancreatitis in children cannot be prevented.
- Preventing certain injuries, especially by having your child always wear a seatbelt, would prevent many cases of pancreatitis caused by trauma.

## How is pancreatitis treated?

- Children with acute pancreatitis can become very ill. They usually need to go to the hospital for tests and treatment.
- Tests include measuring levels of certain enzymes made by the pancreas. X-rays and other imaging studies (ultrasound or computed tomographic [CT] scan) may be performed.
- In the hospital, your child will receive:
  - Medications to control pain.
  - Fluids given through a vein (intravenous [IV]) to treat and prevent dehydration.
  - In severe cases, antibiotics may be given to reduce the risk of infection.
- Your child may receive specific treatments to address the cause of his or her pancreatitis. For example, if the bile duct in the pancreas has become blocked, a procedure can be performed to unblock it. If your child has suffered blunt trauma, for example, in an automobile accident, treatment for other injuries may be needed.

- Acute pancreatitis usually gets better within 2 to 5 days. Once vomiting has stopped, your child can gradually begin drinking liquids and eating solid foods again. As soon as your child has returned to a normal diet, he or she can continue to recover at home.
- Although it rarely occurs in children, severe pancreatitis can result in shock, which means not enough blood and oxygen are getting to the important organs of the body. Your child's doctors and nurses will monitor his or her condition carefully.
- After recovery, your child will receive follow-up care to detect possible complications. Repeated attacks of pancreatitis (chronic pancreatitis) are possible. However,

this is uncommon unless there is some abnormality of the pancreas or other condition such as very high lipid levels (cholesterol and other fats in the blood).



### **When should I call your office?**

While your child is recovering from acute pancreatitis, call our office if any of the following occurs:

- Abdominal pain.
- Vomiting.
- Not eating or drinking.