

Do pancreatic cysts become cancerous?

21 November 2017, by Christos Fountzilias, Md



Credit: Roswell Park Cancer Institute

What is a pancreatic cyst?

Pancreatic cysts are water or mucus filled structures in the pancreas, similar to cysts that appear in other parts of the body. The most common cause of benign (non-cancerous) cysts is pancreatitis, an inflammation of the pancreas. Pancreatitis can be a result of excessive alcohol use or gallstone disease. Additionally, some genetically inherited conditions can predispose a person to get cysts in the pancreas.

How do you know if you have a pancreatic cyst?

Most people do not have any symptoms or pain and their pancreatic cysts are discovered by pure chance. Approximately 2-3 percent of pancreatic cysts are discovered when that patient has a CT scan or MRI of the abdomen for other reasons. There may be some [abdominal pain](#) associated with large cysts. However, for small cysts, other causes of abdominal pain should be excluded before attributing the pain to the cyst.

What types of pancreatic cysts are there?

Cysts in the pancreas can arise as the result of several different processes. There are approximately five major types of pancreatic cysts, depending upon how they developed, where they are located and what they are made out of. Most pancreatic cysts are benign non-neoplastic lesions resulting from pancreatitis. However, benign neoplastic cysts are slightly more common in women.

Do pancreatic cysts become cancerous?

Most cysts are not – less than 1-2 percent of pancreatic cysts are cancerous. However, some may be considered precancerous.

What does it mean if a pancreatic cyst is precancerous?

A precancerous [pancreatic cyst](#) is a benign tumor that has the potential to progress to [pancreatic cancer](#) over the course of years.

What should you do if you have a pancreatic cyst?

It is critical that patients with pancreatic cysts seek out clinicians who have extensive experience with [pancreatic tumors](#) and pancreatic pathology. The clinician will look at certain features in each cyst, such as the size and the presence of any solid components. They will also take into consideration the cysts' growth rate over years when making a decision on whether surgery is needed.

How should these cysts be treated?

Most [pancreatic](#) cysts are not treated. In fact, patients may be at an increased risk for overtreatment at this condition. For the vast majority, proper treatment is continued observation by an experienced clinician. For some patients, surgery may be recommended after monitoring the cysts with a CT scan, MRI or endoscopic ultrasound. Often the cysts can be removed through a minimally invasive surgical approach.

Provided by Roswell Park Cancer Institute

APA citation: Do pancreatic cysts become cancerous? (2017, November 21) retrieved 14 November 2019 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-11-pancreatic-cysts-cancerous.html>

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