

Patient education: Pancreatitis (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

What is pancreatitis? — Pancreatitis is a condition that can cause severe belly pain.

The pancreas is an organ that makes hormones and juices that help break down food ([figure 1](#)). Pancreatitis is the term for when this organ gets irritated or swollen.

Most people get over pancreatitis without any long-lasting effects. But a few people get very sick.

What causes pancreatitis? — There are many causes of pancreatitis. But most cases are caused by gallstones or alcohol abuse:

- Gallstones – Gallstones are hard lumps that form inside an organ called the gallbladder. Both the pancreas and the gallbladder drain into a single tube. If that tube gets clogged by a gallstone, neither of the organs can drain. When that happens, the fluids from both organs get backed up. That can cause pain.
- Alcohol abuse – People who drink too much alcohol for too long sometimes get alcohol-related pancreatitis. People with this form of pancreatitis usually start to feel pain 1 to 3 days after drinking a lot of alcohol or after they suddenly stop drinking. They usually also have nausea and vomiting.

Is there a test for pancreatitis? — There are a few blood tests that can help your doctor or nurse figure out if you have pancreatitis. It's also possible that your doctor will order a special kind of X-ray called a "CT scan" of your belly to check if belly pain is due to pancreatitis or other conditions.

How is pancreatitis treated? — Pancreatitis is usually treated in the hospital. There, your doctor or nurse can give you fluids and pain medicines to help you feel better. If you cannot eat, they can give you food through a tube.

Some people with pancreatitis get an infection, which can be treated with antibiotics. Other possible problems caused by pancreatitis are fluid buildup around the pancreas or organ failure. Fluid buildup around pancreas often goes away on its own but sometimes needs to be drained or treated with surgery. Organ failure is usually handled by a team of doctors in intensive care.

Another important part of treatment is to get rid of the cause of the pancreatitis. If your pancreatitis is caused by gallstones, your doctor might need to treat them, too. People with pancreatitis from alcohol use must learn to give up alcohol to keep from getting pancreatitis again.

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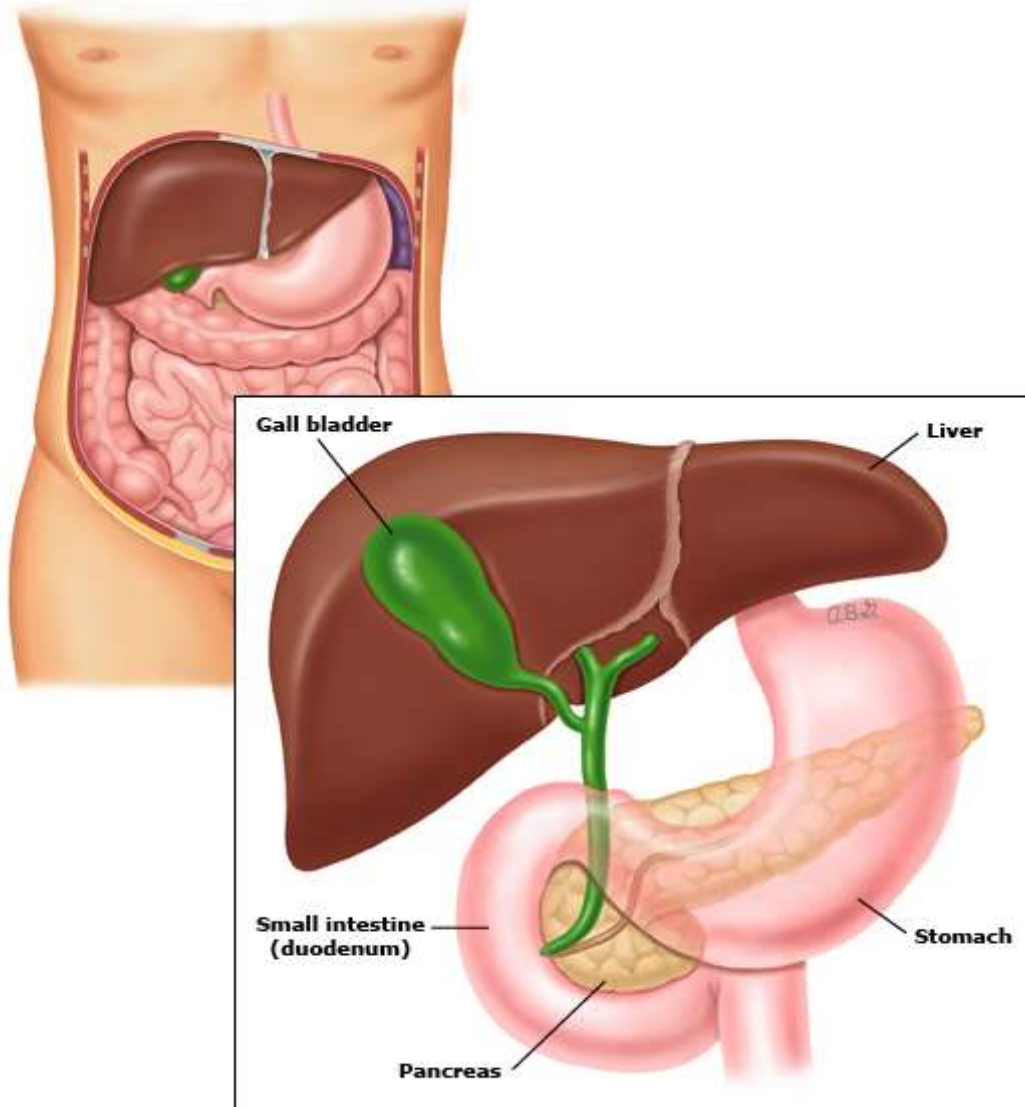
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Topic 15433 Version 5.0

GRAPHICS

Pancreas



The pancreas is an organ that is found behind the stomach. It makes hormones and juices that help the body break down food.

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