

Alcohol and pancreatitis

The pancreas is a gland that produces enzymes which help with digestion, and hormones, such as insulin and glucagon, which control blood sugar levels.

You get pancreatitis when your pancreas becomes inflamed, and its cells are damaged.⁽¹⁾ There are two types of pancreatitis, acute and chronic. Both are often caused by heavy drinking.

FACTS and FIGURES

Acute pancreatitis is most commonly caused by a bout of heavy drinking or by gallstones.

The main symptom of acute pancreatitis is abdominal pain, felt just behind the ribs and spreading through to your back. The pain, which usually comes on over about an hour, can be severe. Other symptoms include nausea, vomiting and fever.⁽²⁾

Most cases come on quickly and usually go away quickly, leaving no permanent damage.

However, one in five cases are severe. Other organs can be damaged by pancreatic enzymes getting into your bloodstream during an attack. This can lead to serious illness, such as kidney or respiratory failure, and can be fatal. About 25% of people who develop severe acute pancreatitis die.⁽³⁾

Each year, in the UK, between five and 80 people in every 100,000 are diagnosed with acute pancreatitis.⁽⁴⁾

Chronic pancreatitis is when your pancreas is constantly inflamed. Heavy drinking, usually over a period of 10 years or more, is the cause of about eight out of 10 cases of chronic pancreatitis. However, the condition can also be hereditary. Men between the ages of 40 and 50 are most commonly affected.⁽⁵⁾

The main symptom of chronic pancreatitis is also abdominal pain that is felt behind the ribs and goes all the way through to your back. It is a recurrent pain, which can be mild initially, but can become severe for some people. Weight loss is common for people with chronic pancreatitis.⁽⁶⁾

Approximately three to nine in every 100,000 people in the UK develop chronic pancreatitis every year.⁽⁷⁾

How does alcohol cause pancreatitis?

A strong link exists between heavy drinking and pancreatitis. Alcohol can trigger the pancreas to become inflamed and its cells become damaged, impeding its digestive function and causing pain.

However, the exact process through which alcohol causes both the acute and chronic versions of the disease is unclear.^{(8) (9)}

- A University of Liverpool study concluded that acute pancreatitis occurs because alcohol acts as a stimulant for the pancreas to produce fatty acids and other fatty substances. These substances can destroy cells and stop energy production in the pancreas.⁽¹⁰⁾

PROGRESSION

If you're diagnosed with acute pancreatitis, you'll be advised to avoid drinking and eat a low fat diet. By doing this, you will reduce your risk of another attack and the risk of developing chronic pancreatitis.⁽¹¹⁾

If you develop chronic pancreatitis it means your pancreas is irreversibly damaged and stops working properly. You will need to take medication for the rest of your life to help you digest food, and to maintain your blood sugar levels if they are affected.⁽¹²⁾

If chronic pancreatitis is caused by heavy drinking, and you continue to drink alcohol, the condition can become severe, reducing your life expectancy by 10 to 20 years.⁽¹³⁾

If you stop drinking as soon as you find out, you improve your chances of controlling the condition.⁽¹⁴⁾

However, complications can still develop as a result of damage to your pancreas, such as:

- Diabetes – Around one in three people with chronic pancreatitis develop diabetes, because the damaged pancreas cannot make insulin.⁽¹⁵⁾
- Pseudocysts – These cysts develop because pancreatic fluid starts to collect when a pancreatic duct is blocked. Around a quarter of people with chronic pancreatitis get a pseudocyst at some time. If they do not go away with time they can be drained or removed.⁽¹⁶⁾
- Pancreatic cancer – People with chronic pancreatitis have a higher chance of getting pancreatic cancer.⁽¹⁷⁾

ADVICE and GETTING HELP

For more information on pancreatitis visit the Pancreatitis Supporters Network's website, www.pancreatitis.org.uk.

Call Drinkline on 0800 917 8282 if you're worried about your own alcohol consumption or that of someone else.

References

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Contents approved by Drinkaware Chief Medical Adviser, Prof. Paul Wallace BSc (Hons), MSc, MBBS, FRCGP, FFPHM

Drinkaware
7-10 Chandos Street
London
W1G 9DQ
0207 307 7450

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