What Is Acute Pancreatitis?

If your pancreas suddenly becomes irritated or inflamed, you have acute pancreatitis. This is most often caused by gallstones. It can also be caused by drinking alcohol. Acute pancreatitis is often very painful. Emergency medical treatment is usually needed.

Acute pancreatitis often requires a visit to the emergency room and hospitalization.

Symptoms of Acute Pancreatitis

Symptoms of acute pancreatitis can come on quickly. It is common to feel severe pain in your upper abdomen that goes through to your back. Other symptoms may include:

- Nausea and vomiting
- Abdominal swelling and tenderness
- Fever
- Rapid pulse
- Shallow, fast breathing
Your Pancreas

Your pancreas is an organ located behind your stomach. The pancreas makes enzymes that help digest the food you eat. It sends fluids containing these enzymes into the small intestine. The pancreas can become inflamed, swollen, and even infected. This is pancreatitis. It can cause severe pain and keep the pancreas from working right.

Causes of Pancreatitis

One of the most common causes of pancreatitis is gallstones. These are hard stones that form in the gallbladder, an organ near the pancreas. The pancreas and gallbladder share a passage into the small intestine called the common bile duct. If gallstones block this duct, fluid can’t leave the pancreas. The fluid backs up and causes pancreatitis. Pancreatitis can also be caused by alcohol, certain medications, trauma, and infection. Problems with the structure of the pancreas may also be a cause.
Your Evaluation

Blood tests help find whether your symptoms are due to acute pancreatitis. A health history and physical exam also help your doctor make a diagnosis. Once pancreatitis is diagnosed, you may have more tests to help find the cause.

An ultrasound may help find gallstones that could cause your pancreatitis.

Possible Tests

If your doctor suspects gallstones, a test called an ultrasound may be done. This test uses sound waves to create a picture of your pancreas and the area around it. You may also have other tests. A CT (computed tomography) scan shows how much the pancreas is inflamed. An ERCP (endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography) examines the common bile duct for gallstones.

Treating Acute Pancreatitis

If you have acute pancreatitis, you may be in the hospital for a few days. During some of this time, you probably won’t be able to eat or drink. This rests your pancreas while it gets better. Nutrition and fluids are given through an IV (intravenous) line. You will also be given medication to help ease any pain.
Once You Go Home
Your doctor will tell you how to help your pancreas heal. This may include the following:

- Eat a low-fat diet. A low-fat diet reduces stress on your pancreas so it can heal.
- Avoid all alcohol. Alcohol irritates your pancreas.
- Take prescribed medications as directed.

Avoid alcohol and high-fat foods.

If You Have Chronic Pancreatitis
If the pancreas stays inflamed for a long time, chronic pancreatitis may result. Chronic pancreatitis is most often due to continued drinking of alcohol. Common symptoms include diarrhea, weight loss, and abdominal pain.

Possible complications of chronic pancreatitis include:

- Diabetes
- Malnutrition (not absorbing enough nutrients)
- Pancreatic cancer (rare)

Treatment for chronic pancreatitis includes:

- Medications to help the pancreas work
- Treatment for gallstones
- Avoiding alcohol
Preventing Future Attacks

Protect your pancreas from irritation that may cause future attacks. Eat a diet low in fat. Avoid alcohol. And follow any other guidelines your doctor gives you.