Why People at High Risk for Pancreatic Cancer Need Regular Screenings

People with pancreatic cancer who are screened yearly are diagnosed earlier and have better health outcomes.

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It's worth it for people at high risk for pancreatic cancer to get screened regularly. A new study from Johns Hopkins Kimmel Cancer Center found that the screenings helped detect precancerous conditions and cancers earlier, allowing individuals to begin treatment when the disease was in its early stages.

Early detection is not the norm for this cancer. In fact, most patients showing symptoms already have late-stage pancreatic cancer, said senior study author Michael Goggins, MBBCh, MD, director of the Pancreatic Cancer Early Detection Laboratory, in a Johns Hopkins press release.

The Cancer of Pancreas Screening-5 (CAPS5) study observed 1,461 individuals at high risk for pancreatic cancer who participated in yearly pancreatic imaging tests. They were deemed to be at high risk because they had either a genetic variant that predisposed them to the cancer or one first-degree relative with pancreatic cancer.

The CAPS5 study enrolled participants from 2014 to 2021 at multiple centers. The screenings included magnetic resonance imaging or endoscopic ultrasound. Results of the study were published online in the Journal of Clinical Oncology.

"A clear majority of patients in the CAPS program who were diagnosed with pancreatic cancer were detected at the first stage of the disease if they maintained their surveillance," Goggins said in the press release.

Out of the observed individuals, 10 people were diagnosed with pancreatic cancer—including one who was diagnosed four years after forgoing recommended surveillance. Seven out of the remaining nine patients were diagnosed with Stage I pancreatic cancer. The two others had been diagnosed with Stage IIB and Stage III pancreatic cancer.

Concerning lesions were detected in eight participants who subsequently had pancreatic surgeries. Of these, three people had high-grade dysplasia precancerous conditions—abnormal cells within tissue—and five had low-grade dysplasia. Other cancers were detected during the study, including

17 cases of breast cancer, 11 cases of prostate cancer and seven cases of melanoma.

"Many of those diagnosed with pancreatic cancer under surveillance can be potentially cured," Goggins said. "By contrast, people who dropped off their surveillance had poor survival rates. Our results support the CAPS surveillance recommendation that those who meet the criteria should undergo regular screenings."

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