

PANCREATIC CANCER

Pancreatic cancer is usually diagnosed at a late stage with a poor prognosis, and rarely presents in patients under age 40. Most tumors occur in the head of the pancreas, the larger end of the organ, which produces digestive enzymes (see label G and inset), and cancer will often spread to the surrounding organs: namely, the liver, stomach, and gallbladder. Late-stage diagnoses can be attributed to a lack of symptoms in earlier stages and

nonspecific symptoms—such as jaundice, clay-colored stools, weight loss, dark urine, and belly pain that spreads to the sides and back—in later stages.

Black Americans have the highest rate of pancreatic cancer among any racial or ethnic group in the United States, and a lower survival rate compared to white patients. Jaundice—caused by the buildup of bilirubin when the bile

ducts (labeled B) are blocked by cancer—may be misdiagnosed or under-diagnosed by practitioners unfamiliar with the normal appearance of the sclera (the white part of the eye) in patients with dark skin some individuals, high levels of melanin (brown pigment) can build up and cause changes in appearance to the sclera. Yellowing of the sclera may also occur naturally with age; both are benign and should not be mistaken for jaundice.

Label key

- A – Liver
- B – Bile ducts
- C – Esophagus
- D – Stomach
- E – Gallbladder
- F – Pancreas
- G – Duodenum
- H – Tumor at head of pancreas

