

Michigan Medicine Comprehensive Pancreas Program in Gastroenterology

Pain Policy

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Many patients with pancreatic disease have chronic pain, which markedly impairs quality of life and contributes to inability to function. At the Comprehensive Pancreas Program, we believe that pain must be assessed and addressed as part of treating the whole patient.

The causes of pain in pancreatic disease are not the same for each person, and treatments that help some may not be appropriate for others. We carefully evaluate our patients with pain to determine which approaches are most likely to help their pain. Depending on the individual, we may offer medication treatments, procedural interventions, surgical interventions, and psychological support to help relieve pain. Frequently, best results are achieved with a combination of approaches. Complete pain elimination is usually not possible, but we aim to improve pain control in the majority of patients.

Our team has great expertise in procedural treatments, and we refer to experienced surgeons if surgery seems the best option. Regarding medical management of chronic pancreatic pain the most effective medications are usually certain antidepressant and anti-epileptic medications. Although developed for other purposes, these medications adjust central nervous system chemicals in ways that have been shown to reduce pain in clinical trials. In addition to being the most effective, these medications are also among the safest treatment options. Our team can help identify non-opioid drug regimens to help reduce pain and improve quality of life.

Despite widespread use, opioid medications may not provide much relief for most patients with chronic pancreatic pain. They also carry serious risks of major medical complications, development of addiction, and death, even in patients who genuinely suffer from severe pain. Many people have been treated with high doses of opioid medications for many years, yet see little pain relief. When these medications are not providing pain relief we recommend consulting with a local pain specialist having experience in helping patients to safely discontinue opioids.

For those patients who are prescribed opioids, we believe that our patients are best served by having these medications managed by their primary care doctors. Because of the complexity and risk of these medications, ongoing close follow-up is necessary for those patients who require them. For these reasons, we do not take over prescribing of opioid medications for our patients.

While chronic pancreatic pain can rarely be “cured”, there is often much that can be done to reduce pain and improve quality of life, for which we offer our patients a comprehensive evaluation and treatment recommendations.