

# Lifelines

from the National Cancer Institute



## **Celebrity Battles with Pancreatic Cancer Help Increase Awareness of a Cancer That Many Know Very Little About**

*By the National Cancer Institute*

Pancreatic cancer is not a *new* disease. It just so happens that it has received a lot of attention with the health battles of celebrities including actor Patrick Swayze and football great Gene Upshaw. Their struggle with pancreatic cancer has shed some light on the severity of this disease. Unfortunately, a lack of awareness of pancreatic cancer continues to exist.

In 2010, an estimated 43,140 new cases and 36,800 deaths from pancreatic cancer were predicted for the year. Pancreatic cancer is the fourth leading cause of cancer death among men and women in the United States. This cancer is so deadly because it is usually not diagnosed until the disease has spread.

The diagnosis rate for pancreatic cancer is highest among African Americans. African Americans are also more likely than other groups to die from pancreatic cancer. In particular, African Americans are more likely to be diagnosed with advanced—and thus untreatable—stages of pancreatic cancer. For African Americans, the rate of new pancreatic cases diagnosed is 16 for every 100,000 people and the death rate from the disease for African Americans is 14 per 100,000, according to the NCI's Surveillance Epidemiology and End Results (SEER) statistics.

The exact causes of pancreatic cancer are unknown. However, several factors have been found to increase an individual's risk for pancreatic cancer. People who smoke cigarettes – the main risk factor – are two to three times more likely to develop the disease than nonsmokers. A diet high in fat and calories may be linked to increased risk. Pancreatic cancer also occurs more often among people with diabetes than those without. Most cases of pancreatic cancer occur in individuals over the age of 60 and men are at higher risk than women. Individuals with a family history of pancreatic cancer or a personal history of chronic pancreatitis are also more at risk than the general population.

Early stages of pancreatic cancer often occur without symptoms. When symptoms do occur, they are usually similar to those of other, less serious, illnesses. These symptoms include pain in the upper abdomen or back, yellow skin and eyes (from jaundice), weakness, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, and weight loss. Patients who feel they may be experiencing these symptoms are encouraged to talk to their doctor. Pancreatic cancer is more easily treated when it is diagnosed early. However, even with early detection, treatment is toxic and survival is poor.

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Because pancreatic cancer is a serious disease, it is important that people do their best to reduce their personal risk. One way to reduce your risk for pancreatic cancer is to quit smoking. The National Cancer Institute offers many resources to help people quit smoking. If you or someone you know wants help with quitting, please call the National Cancer Institute's Smoking Quit-line toll-free at 1-877-44U-QUIT (1-877-448-7848). The information specialists on the Quit-line can provide suggestions and support. Additionally, the Smokefree Web sites (<http://www.smokefree.gov> and <http://women.smokefree.gov/>) allow you to choose the help that best fits your needs.

Pancreatic cancer is difficult to treat. Doctors are exploring new ways to treat it. Research already has led to better quality of life for people with cancer of the pancreas. Physicians may suggest that patients participate in a clinical trial. Clinical trials are important options for pancreatic cancer patients to consider as their participation may help find more successful treatments. To find out more information about clinical trials, visit [www.cancer.gov/clinicaltrials](http://www.cancer.gov/clinicaltrials).

For more information about pancreatic cancer, visit [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov) or call 1-800-4-CANCER to speak with a specialist.

*NCI leads the National Cancer Program and the NIH effort to dramatically reduce the burden of cancer and improve the lives of cancer patients and their families, through research into prevention and cancer biology, the development of new interventions, and the training and mentoring of new researchers. For more information about cancer, please visit the NCI Web site at [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov) or call NCI's Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237).*