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Current Trends and Future Directions in Pancreatic Cancer Management: review

Authors:

Wojciech Firlej [WF]*

wojtek.firlej100@wp.pl

ORCID 0009-0002-0813-2617

Poznan University of Medical Sciences, Poland

ul. Fredry 10, 61-701 Poznań, Poland

Michał Nowak [MN]*

michal.nowak.4123@gmail.com

ORCID 0000-0002-0087-4387

Poznan University of Medical Sciences, Poland

ul. Fredry 10, 61-701 Poznań, Poland

Barbara Ufnalska [BU]

b.ufnalska@gmail.com

ORCID 0000-0001-6334-1812

Specialist Mother and Child Healthcare Facility, Poland

ul. Wrzoska 1, 60-663 Poznań, Poland

Anna Konarska [AK]
annakonarska111@gmail.com
ORCID 0009-0002-0142-6970
F.Raszeja's Municipal Hospital, Poland
ul. Adama Mickiewicza 2, 60-834 Poznań, Poland

Anna Machowiak [AM]
anmachowiak@gmail.com
ORCID 0009-0007-3868-2480
Specialist Mother and Child Healthcare Facility, Poland
ul. Wrzoska 1, 60-663 Poznań, Poland

Artur Fabijański [AF]
artur.fab@gmail.com
ORCID 0000-0001-8639-6154
Specialist Mother and Child Healthcare Facility, Poland
ul. Wrzoska 1, 60-663 Poznań, Poland

Mateusz Janik [MJ]
mateusz.janik07@gmail.com
ORCID 0009-0001-4679-6935
HCP Medical Center, Poland
28 czerwca 1956 r. 194, 66-446 Poznań, Poland

Justyna Lisiecka [JL]
justynaalisieckaa@gmail.com
ORCID 0009-0001-9545-910X
Promienista Primary Healthcare Center, Poland
ul. Promienista 89, 60-141 Poznań, Poland

Joanna Rychlewska-Duda [JRD]
joanna.rychlewska4@gmail.com
ORCID 0009-0002-8992-1078
CRO-MED Medical and Physiotherapy Clinic, Poland

Osiedle Edwarda Raczyńskiego 2/23, 62-020 Swarzędz, Poland

Adriana Dukacz [AD]
adriana.dukacz@onet.pl
ORCID 0009- 0007-4428-8789
Helidor Święcicki Clinical Hospital, Poland
ul. Przybyszewskiego 49, 60-355 Poznań, Poland

Abstract

Introduction:
Pancreatic cancer remains one of the most aggressive and lethal malignancies, characterized by late diagnosis, limited treatment options, and a poor overall prognosis. Advances in understanding the molecular and cellular mechanisms underlying this disease have opened pathways for innovative therapeutic approaches.

Purpose:
This review aims to summarize the current knowledge of pancreatic cancer, focusing on its pathophysiology, diagnostic challenges, and emerging therapeutic strategies, including targeted therapies, immunotherapy, and novel drug delivery systems.

Material and methods:

The literature review was performed by searching the PubMed and Google Scholar databases using the keywords "pancreatic cancer," "immunotherapy," "chemotherapy," and "diagnosis." Only articles published from 2012 onward were included in the analysis.

Results:
The review highlights significant progress in identifying genetic mutations, such as KRAS, TP53, and SMAD4, which drive pancreatic tumorigenesis. Diagnostic advancements, including liquid biopsies and molecular imaging, offer potential for earlier detection. Therapeutic innovations discussed include precision medicine approaches, such as inhibitors targeting KRAS mutations, immune checkpoint blockade therapies, and nanoparticle-based

drug delivery systems. Early clinical trials show promise in improving response rates and survival outcomes, but challenges in resistance mechanisms and delivery efficiency persist.

Conclusion:
While pancreatic cancer remains a formidable challenge, recent advancements provide hope for improved management and outcomes. Continued multidisciplinary research and clinical trials are essential to translate these findings into effective standard-of-care treatments. This review underscores the importance of integrating novel therapies with conventional approaches to optimize patient outcomes.

Key words: PDAC, chemotherapy, immunotherapy, KRAS mutations, early diagnosis.

Introduction:

Pancreatic ductal adenocarcinoma (PDAC) is an exceptionally aggressive form of cancer with a poor prognosis.[1,2,3] Its hallmarks include late-stage diagnosis, rapid disease progression, and limited therapeutic options[1], which result in high mortality rates and pose a substantial public health challenge.[4,5,6] Beyond its impact on patients, the disease affects their families, healthcare systems, and global economies.[4] As a pressing global health issue, pancreatic cancer necessitates urgent efforts to improve early detection, develop more effective treatments, and enhance patient outcomes. Its silent onset and swift progression contribute significantly to its high mortality, placing immense strain on healthcare resources worldwide.[1,2] Additionally, the economic costs of pancreatic cancer—stemming from treatment expenses, research funding, and productivity losses—further highlight the critical need to address this serious health concern.

State of knowledge:

1. Epidemiology

Pancreatic cancer represents a significant global health concern. Pancreatic cancer ranks 14th among the most common cancers and 7th in terms of mortality. The disease's aggressive nature is reflected in its grim prognosis: the average survival time from diagnosis is a mere 6 months, with less than 2% of patients surviving 5 years post-diagnosis.[1,7,8] Pancreatic cancer predominantly affects older individuals. Diagnoses in patients under 30 years of age are exceedingly uncommon. Approximately 90% of new cases occur in individuals over 55, with the highest prevalence observed among those in their 60s and 70s. Moreover, the incidence of this cancer is higher in men than in women, with a ratio of approximately 5.5 to 4. The occurrence of pancreatic cancer differs considerably across regions. It is most frequently diagnosed in Europe and North America, while its prevalence is lowest in Africa and South Central Asia.[9,10,11,12] Overall, The increasing incidence and mortality rates are observed worldwide with higher incidence rates in developed countries compared to developing countries. The global burden of pancreatic cancer is substantial and continues to rise, posing a significant public health challenge.[4]

2. Risk Factors: Genetic, Lifestyle, and Environmental Influences

Risk factors for pancreatic cancer encompass genetic predispositions, lifestyle choices, and external environmental factors. A family history of the disease notably heightens the risk, with genes like BRCA1, BRCA2, and CDKN2A identified as key contributors. However, much of the genetic foundation behind familial cases remains unclear.[13,14]

Tobacco use is a well-documented risk factor, and heavy alcohol consumption further exacerbates the likelihood of developing pancreatic cancer. When combined, smoking and alcohol use substantially increase the risk. Additional studies are needed to clarify the mechanisms through which these behaviors contribute to cancer development.[6,15,16]

Diet and obesity also play pivotal roles in pancreatic cancer risk. Diets rich in processed foods, red meat, and saturated fats, coupled with low fruit and vegetable intake, have been linked to higher risk levels. Obesity, particularly abdominal obesity, further elevates the risk.[2,6,15,17]

Research efforts are ongoing to identify specific dietary elements that influence risk and to understand the biological processes connecting diet and obesity to cancer. Exploring the interplay between dietary factors, genetic predisposition, and conditions like diabetes is essential for a more comprehensive understanding.

Diabetes mellitus is strongly correlated with pancreatic cancer, possibly due to chronic inflammation and disruptions in insulin signaling. Additionally, chronic pancreatitis markedly increases cancer risk, likely because prolonged inflammation fosters the formation of precancerous lesions.[2,6,16,18,19] Further research is needed to unravel these complex interactions.

3. Pathophysiology includes Molecular Mechanisms and tumor microenvironment.

Pancreatic cancer arises from a complex interaction of genetic and epigenetic changes.[20,21] KRAS mutations are particularly common, present in over 80% of cases. Other frequently affected genes include TP53, CDKN2A, and SMAD4, which play critical roles in disrupting signaling pathways related to cell growth, programmed cell death, and DNA repair.[22] Further studies are necessary to identify additional driver mutations and to better understand how these genetic alterations interact.

The tumor microenvironment significantly influences pancreatic cancer progression. It is marked by a dense, desmoplastic stroma composed of fibroblasts, immune cells, and extracellular matrix elements. This stroma acts as a physical barrier, hindering the penetration of drugs and the infiltration of immune cells, thereby contributing to the cancer's resistance to standard treatments.[20,23] Additional research is essential to unravel the intricate dynamics within the tumor microenvironment and to develop therapies that can effectively target these interactions, ultimately enhancing treatment outcomes.

4. Diagnosis: Clinical Presentation, Imaging, and Biomarkers

Pancreatic cancer is often diagnosed at an advanced stage due to vague symptoms such as abdominal pain, unintentional weight loss, jaundice, and fatigue.[24,25] The absence of distinctive early signs is a key factor contributing to delayed diagnosis and poor outcomes.[26]

Imaging techniques, including CT, MRI, and endoscopic ultrasound (EUS), are essential tools for diagnosing pancreatic cancer. EUS is particularly valuable as it facilitates tissue sampling

and accurate staging.[27,28,29] Establishing standardized imaging protocols could improve diagnostic efficiency and accuracy.[30]

The serum biomarker CA 19-9 is commonly used in pancreatic cancer diagnosis, but its sensitivity and specificity are limited. Research efforts are focused on discovering and validating more reliable biomarkers, such as microRNAs and other circulating tumor markers. Liquid biopsy techniques are also being actively explored for their potential in early detection and ongoing disease monitoring.[31,32,33]

5. Treatment

Surgical resection remains the only potential curative option for pancreatic cancer; however, it is viable for only a small proportion of patients due to late-stage diagnosis and tumor location.[25,34,35] Advances in surgical techniques and perioperative management are enhancing outcomes for selected patients. Innovations such as minimally invasive procedures, advanced imaging guidance, and robotic surgery are improving surgical precision and reducing complications. Continued research is necessary to refine surgical methods, enhance patient selection criteria, and optimize perioperative care to improve overall outcomes.

For advanced pancreatic cancer, chemotherapy and radiotherapy serve as palliative treatments.[22,35,36] Gemcitabine-based therapies are frequently used, though response rates remain limited. In some cases, combining chemotherapy with radiotherapy offers better outcomes. Advances in radiotherapy, such as intensity-modulated radiotherapy (IMRT), are improving treatment precision while minimizing side effects.[35,36] Ongoing research aims to enhance the effectiveness of these therapies and expand treatment options for patients with advanced disease.

6. Prognosis

Survival Rates: Overview of Survival Statistics and Influencing Factors

Pancreatic cancer is associated with a grim outlook, with 5-year survival rates generally falling below 10%.[2,3,6,35] These rates depend on factors such as the cancer stage at diagnosis, the type of treatment administered, and patient-specific characteristics.[12,34,39] Timely diagnosis and effective treatment are crucial in improving survival outcomes.[25] The consistently low survival rates emphasize the need for advancements in early detection techniques and better treatment options. Prognosis is influenced by tumor stage and grade,

metastasis presence, patient age, overall health, and treatment response. Research should aim to develop predictive biomarkers to pinpoint patients likely to benefit from particular therapies.[12,34,39]

7. **Quality of Life**

   The impact of pancreatic cancer and its treatments on patients' quality of life is profound.[24,35] Symptoms, side effects from treatments, and emotional strain detrimentally affect physical and mental health. Therefore, there is a pressing need for research to identify strategies that can enhance quality of life for these patients.[24] Supportive care, such as pain management, nutritional assistance, and psychosocial support, plays a vital role in alleviating patient discomfort. Moreover, research should focus on developing interventions that address the challenges faced by both patients and their families. Priority should also be given to creating new therapies with fewer adverse effects and greater patient tolerance.[24,35]

8. **Prevention and Screening:**

   At present, there are no universally accepted screening protocols for the general population.[22,40] Nonetheless, screening is considered for individuals with elevated risk factors, such as those with a family history of pancreatic cancer or chronic pancreatitis.[16,19] Imaging methods, including EUS and MRI, are employed to screen high-risk individuals.[19] The formulation of cost-effective and efficient screening methods remains a critical challenge in preventing pancreatic cancer. Research efforts are necessary to refine strategies for identifying high-risk individuals and to develop non-invasive screening tools with enhanced sensitivity and specificity. Determining the optimal screening approach and frequency is an area of ongoing exploration.[16,22,40]

9. **Preventive Strategies**

   Adopting lifestyle changes, such as avoiding tobacco, maintaining a healthy weight, and following a balanced diet, plays a significant role in reducing pancreatic cancer risk.[6,16,17] Further investigations are needed to evaluate the potential of chemopreventive agents.[41,42,43] Public health initiatives that encourage healthier lifestyles are vital for reducing the incidence of this disease. Additional studies are necessary to assess the efficacy of dietary modifications and identify safe and effective

chemopreventive options. Moreover, research into the interactions between genetic predispositions and lifestyle factors is essential.[6,16,17]

Conclusion:

1. Summary of Key Findings:

Pancreatic cancer poses a significant public health issue, characterized by delayed diagnoses, rapid disease progression, and limited treatment options.[1,2] Key risk factors include genetic predispositions, smoking, alcohol consumption, obesity, diabetes, and chronic pancreatitis.[2,6] Diagnosis primarily relies on imaging and biomarkers, but improved early detection methods are critical.[25,32] While treatments like surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy, and newer therapies exist, survival rates remain poor.[20,35] Research efforts are directed toward identifying biomarkers, advancing therapies, and improving prevention measures.[19,20,32] The high mortality rate and scarce treatment options underscore the urgent need for innovations in early detection, therapeutic approaches, and prevention. Despite progress in understanding the molecular biology of pancreatic cancer, translating these findings into better clinical outcomes remains a priority.[1,2]

2. Future Directions:

Future studies should prioritize enhancing early detection via the development of more accurate biomarkers [31], [32] and advanced imaging technologies.[27,30,31,32] Investigating the tumor microenvironment[20,23] and creating targeted therapies[20,21], as well as immunotherapies[20,23,38] and other innovative treatments are crucial.[35,37] Large-scale studies are necessary to explore the interplay between genetic and environmental factors[44,45], and to design effective prevention strategies.[19,41] Addressing disparities in healthcare access and improving availability are essential for mitigating pancreatic cancer's burden.[45,46,47] Finally, incorporating artificial intelligence in diagnostic and treatment planning processes shows promise.[27,30] Developing personalized medicine approaches tailored to individual characteristics and risks is vital for enhancing outcomes. Sustained investment in research and collaborative efforts is imperative for overcoming the challenges of pancreatic cancer and improving patient and family well-being.

Disclosure:

Authors contribution:

Conceptualization:, Wojciech Firlej*, Michał Nowak*, Mateusz Janik, Joanna Rychlewska-Duda

Methodology: Anna Machowiak, Barbara Ufnalska

Software: Artur Fabijanski, Michal Nowak, Adriana Daria Dukacz

Check: Joanna Rychlewska-Duda, Anna Konarska

Formal Analysis: Wojciech Firlej, Michał Nowak, Barbara Ufnalska

Investigation: Michal Nowak, Adriana Daria Dukacz, Anna Machowiak

Resources: Artur Fabijanski, Justyna Lisiecka, Wojciech Firlej

Data Curation: Mateusz Janik, Wojciech Firlej, Anna Konarska

Writing-Rough Preparation: Barbara Unalska, Artur Fabijanski, Anna Machowiak

Writing-Review and Editing: Anna Konarska, Justyna Lisiecka, Artur Fabijanski, Joanna Rychlewska-Duda, Mateusz Janik, Michal Nowak, Adriana Daria Dukacz

Visualization: Justyna Lisiecka, Joanna Rychlewska-Duda, Barbara Unalska Supervision: Barbara Unalska, Anna Konarska, Joanna Rychlewska-Duda

Project Administration: Wojciech Firlej, Michal Nowak, Adriana Daria Dukacz

* These authors have contributed equally to this work and share first authorship

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