

Pancreas Transplant

What is a pancreas transplant?

A pancreas transplant is a surgical procedure to implant a healthy pancreas from a donor into a patient who suffers from type 1 diabetes.

Who can benefit from pancreas transplant surgery?

The pancreas creates insulin and enzymes, which enable us to digest food. A diabetes patient's pancreas can no longer create insulin, and therefore must have daily injections of insulin as a substitute. A pancreas transplant means that a sufferer of advanced type 1 diabetes no longer needs daily insulin shots, can eat a regular diet and become more active.

Procedure

Pancreas transplant surgery is performed under a general anesthetic. An incision is made in the lower abdomen and the new pancreas placed inside. The old pancreas is usually left inside the body unless there is a cause for future concerns (infection etc.). The new pancreas is then attached to the blood vessels and small intestine - enabling it to produce insulin and to work alongside the old pancreas - which will continue to drain any digestive juices. A catheter (tube) is inserted into the bladder to help drain any fluid build-up, and sometimes drainage tubes will be left in the abdomen following the procedure. The initial incision is then closed using clips or stitches. Your new pancreas should begin to work straight away. Pancreas transplant surgery is often combined with kidney transplant surgery. Sometimes there may be a shortage of donor pancreases; in this case a living relative may be able to donate a portion of their pancreas. Your surgeon will explain to you the relevant procedure to your condition.

Recovery period

You should expect to stay in hospital for around 7-10 days, and any drainage tubes should be removed shortly after surgery. Following the pancreas transplant, you will need to take immunosuppressive medication for the rest of your life – be aware there may be some side effects. Full recovery takes up to three weeks after which you should be able to resume most activities, however you will need to take up to three months off work. Regular visits to your physician are necessary so that they can monitor recovery for the first few months following surgery. Prognosis of a successful, fully-function pancreas following pancreas transplant surgery is around 70-75% after one year, and around 50-55% after five years.

Risks

As with any surgical procedure, pancreas transplant carries some risks. These include bleeding, infection, rejection of the pancreas, blood clotting, inflammation (pancreatitis), high blood pressure, high cholesterol and a higher risk of cancer.