

My Pancreas

A simple guide to where your pancreas is and what it does

This leaflet explains where your pancreas is and what it does. Understanding your own body can make it easier to follow your care plan and to ask questions during your appointments.

Where is my pancreas?

Your pancreas is a small, soft, leaf-shaped organ that sits deep in your upper abdomen (tummy), behind your stomach. It lies roughly level with your lower ribs, stretching from just to the right of your midline (near your liver and gallbladder) across to your left side (near your spleen).

Because it sits so far back in the abdomen, close to your spine, you cannot feel your pancreas from the outside, and it is not visible or easily felt on examination.

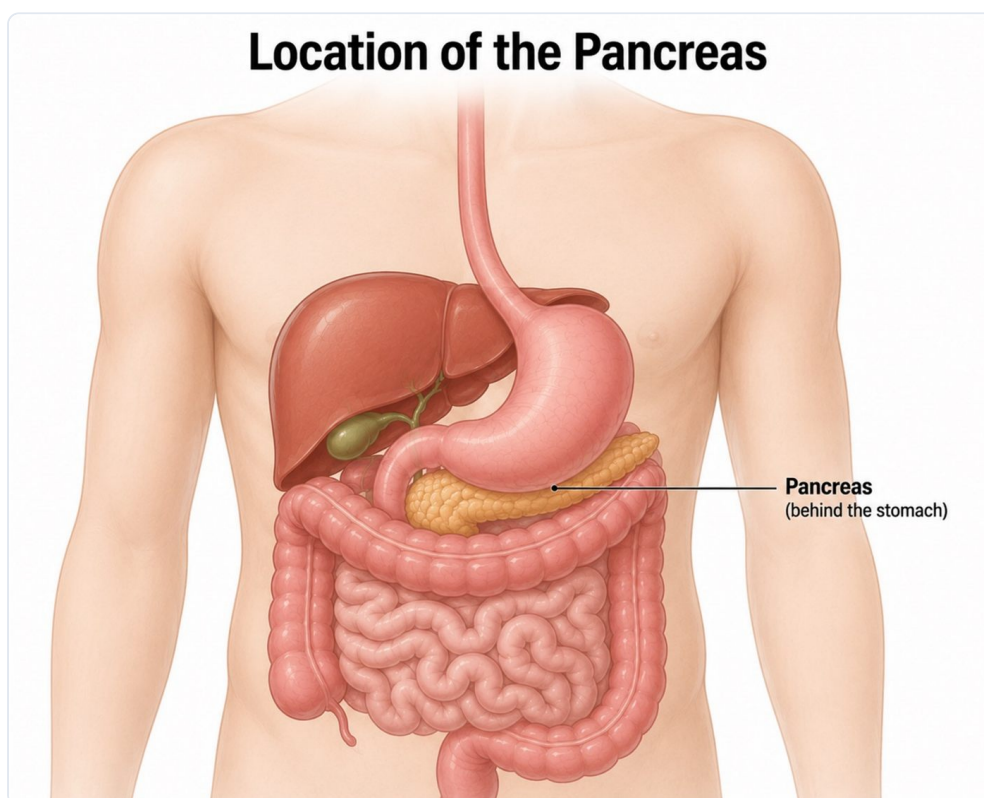


Figure 1: The pancreas lies behind the stomach, in the upper abdomen.

Nearby organs

- **Stomach:** lies just in front of the pancreas
- **Duodenum** (first part of the small bowel): curls around the head of the pancreas, where the pancreatic duct drains

- **Liver and gallbladder:** sit above and to the right
- **Spleen:** sits to the left, near the tail of the pancreas

What does my pancreas do?

Your pancreas has two quite different jobs. One helps you digest food; the other helps control your blood sugar. Doctors describe these as its “exocrine” and “endocrine” functions.

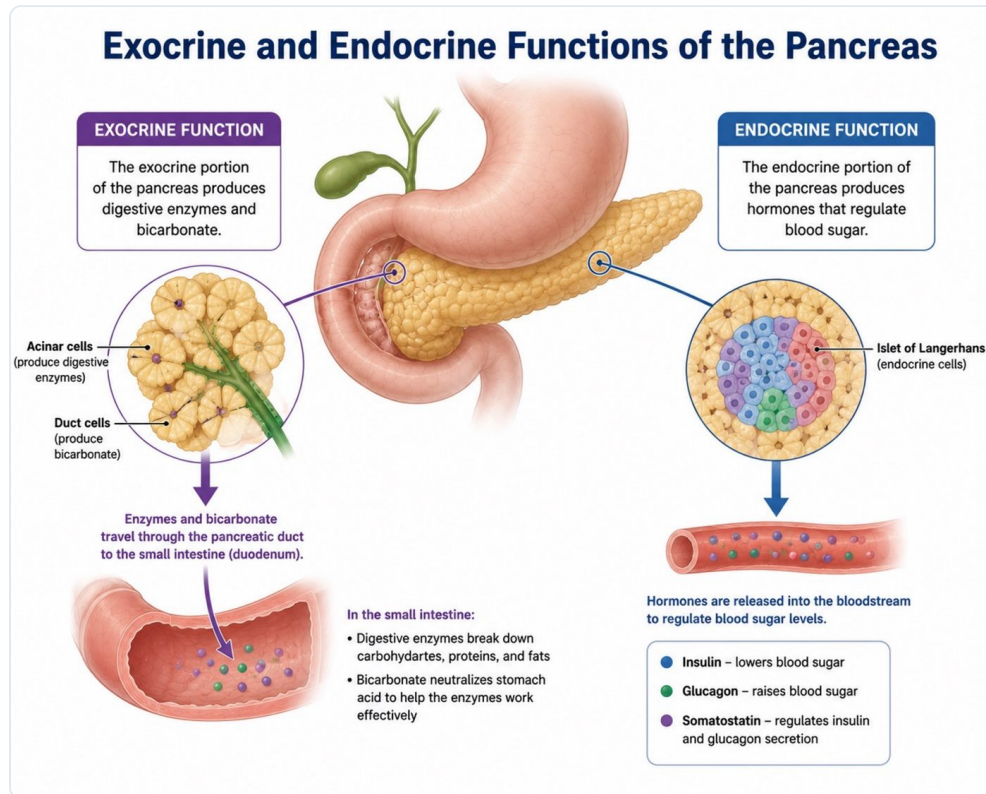


Figure 2: The exocrine and endocrine functions of the pancreas.

1. Exocrine function: helping you digest food

- **Acinar cells** make digestive enzymes that break down carbohydrates, proteins and fats.
- **Duct cells** make bicarbonate, which neutralises acid coming from the stomach so the enzymes can work properly.
- These enzymes and bicarbonate travel along the pancreatic duct into the duodenum, where digestion of food takes place.

2. Endocrine function: controlling blood sugar

- Small clusters of cells called the **islets of Langerhans** release hormones directly into the bloodstream.
- **Insulin** lowers blood sugar levels.
- **Glucagon** raises blood sugar levels.
- **Somatostatin** helps balance and regulate the release of insulin and glucagon.

Together, these two functions mean your pancreas plays an essential role both in digesting the food you eat and in keeping your blood sugar steady throughout the day.

Key points to remember

- The pancreas sits deep behind the stomach, in the upper abdomen.
- It has two main jobs: digesting food (exocrine) and controlling blood sugar (endocrine).
- Problems with either function can affect digestion, weight, or blood sugar control.
- If you have any questions about your pancreas or your treatment, please ask your care team; no question is too small.

This leaflet is for general information only and does not replace advice from your own doctor or specialist team. If you are worried about any symptoms, please contact your care team.

Pancreatitis Scotland, a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO), Registered Scottish Charity No. SC055241

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