

Momentum Newsletter: Winter 2024

As the year winds down and we reflect on all we've done this year, we look forward to 2025 with pride and hope. We began the year with a ribbon-cutting ceremony at the new [Agi Hirshberg Center for Pancreatic Diseases at UCLA](#). In this bright and beautiful new space where, patients are seen with a holistic, whole-body approach that unites clinicians under one roof. We had an amazing year of events, from our Symposium for patients and caregivers to our outdoor stationary cycling event, the Tour de Pier, to our signature LA Cancer Challenge that kicks off our month of awareness in November. It has been a full and busy year that fills us with hope and reinvigorates us to boldly face 2025 with the mantra, "Never Give Up! The journey continues with an end in sight."

Newly Designed Patient Resources and Spanish-Language Resources

We've redesigned the Patient & Caregivers section of our website to include more resources than ever. From our [Where to Begin](#) guide to expanded information for [families](#), our website caringly guides patients and caregivers through a pancreatic cancer diagnosis. Plus, we've translated crucial information into [Spanish](#) to help increase awareness in more communities. We're here to support anyone facing pancreatic cancer and our [Patient Services](#) are always free of charge.

[Explore our new resources →](#)

American Pancreatic Association (APA) Meeting & Hirshberg Symposium

Each year, the [APA](#) brings together an international group of researchers to discuss advances and opportunities in clinical and basic science research related to diseases of the pancreas, particularly pancreatic cancer. The Hirshberg Foundation hosts a Hirshberg Symposium to tackle emerging areas of study. This year's panel, *Targeting KRAS to Treat Pancreatic Cancer*, will cover topics such as the current therapeutic landscape of KRAS inhibitors and new insights into the biology and therapeutic strategies for treating pancreas cancer. We look forward to sharing more updates from the APA and our Seed Grant awardees who are researching KRAS.

[Learn more about KRAS →](#)

2024 Seed Grant Cohort Announced

Our Seed Grant Program continues to shine with our awardees receiving [large grants](#) from the NIH and NCI. This year, we're proud to fund more research than ever, thanks to the success of our [Tour de Pier](#) and [LA Cancer Challenge](#) events and your generosity! With projects focused on early detection, better treatment options, and innovative new ways to tackle KRAS, this year's cohort infuses the end of the year with hope. Since 2005, our Seed Grant Program has fostered an environment for research to bloom.

[Meet the 2024 Seed Grant Cohort →](#)

The 27th LA Cancer Challenge was an Incredible Success

In October, the 27th LA Cancer Challenge raised over \$650,000, one of our most successful years to date, thanks to the fundraising efforts and participation of our LACC family! Joined by Honorary Starter and [9-year pancreatic cancer survivor, Tom Arai](#), we shared his incredible journey and inspired patients and families. We were also thrilled to give the [Honorary Medical Chair title to three brilliant researchers](#), Drs. Timothy Donahue, Zev Wainberg & Caius Radu, who were awarded a transformative \$4 million grant from the National Cancer Institute (NCI). Together, we surpassed our fundraising goal, celebrated how far our community has come and the ways in which we're moving forward.

As you prepare to make your tax-deductible year-end gift, the Hirshberg Foundation thanks you for being instrumental in driving research forward and giving countless patients and families the support services they need. Together, we have raised awareness across the country and around the globe because of your unwavering support.

Making sense of the nonsensical when faced with

pancreatic cancer

Wendy Hammers is a dear friend of the foundation and an inspirational pancreatic cancer survivor. She has shared her story and wisdom at our annual [Symposium](#) on the Patient & Caregiver Panel, through our [Patient & Family Webinar Series](#) – [twice](#) – and most recently, with UCLA Health. She is a joy and brings light to a difficult diagnosis. Her talks on “breaking up with cancer” are tangible tools that help patients and loved ones focus on the aspects they can control and encourage us all to laugh a little more.

This article originally appeared on the UCLA Health website on November 4th, 2024. You can find the original [here](#).

By [Leo Smith](#)

"Comedy is part of the reason I'm alive," says Wendy Hammers, who gives motivational talks about how she "broke up with cancer." (Photo by John McCoy/UCLA Health)

Click on her [2015 video clip](#) and you'll see Wendy Hammers in a hospital room, an IV tube connecting her to a small, drab machine as she undergoes chemotherapy for pancreatic cancer. She is dancing and smiling during the infusion.

Hammers has approached her cancer journey – from the first excruciating pain to the diagnosis, and then through the treatment – with a positive attitude and a sense of humor.

"There were three prongs of treatment – chemotherapy, surgery and mindset. For me, mindset was the most important. It was the one that gave me the inner strength to deal with the other two," Hammers said. "Comedy is part of the reason I'm alive. Humor is

just another word for perspective – it helps makes sense of the nonsensical.”

Hammers has honed that attitude as a stand-up comic and actress who now travels the country giving motivational talks, loaded with laughs, on how she [“broke up with cancer.”](#)

A cancer with few clues

Pancreatic cancer is the No. 3 cause of cancer deaths in the U.S., behind lung and colon cancers. The five-year survival rate is just 13%, but improving by about 1% annually largely due to advances in treatment and therapies, said Timothy Donahue, MD, director of the [UCLA Agi Hirshberg Center for Pancreatic Diseases](#).

Unlike other cancers – such as prostate cancer, which can be detected early through a prostate-specific antigen (PSA) blood test – there are no known early markers for pancreatic cancer.

“They’ve never found an accurate tumor marker that can be used for screening and earlier diagnosis among the broader population,” said [Dr. Donahue](#), a member of the UCLA Health Jonsson Comprehensive Cancer Center and professor of surgery at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA. “The main precursor lesion that turns into pancreatic cancer cannot be seen on any imaging tests.”

For Hammers, unexpected weight loss may have been the first clue that something was wrong. But it was a severe stabbing pain on her left side, near her hip, that caught her attention.

“I felt good, until I felt terrible,” she said. “I lived with that pain for about a week before I went to the doctor.”

Diagnosis and treatment

The pancreas, a gland located in the back of the abdomen, helps with digestion and blood sugar regulation. Most tumors arise in the head of the pancreas, on the right side, said Dr. Donahue. In those cases, the cancer is usually diagnosed earlier than other parts of the organ because the tumors obstruct the bile duct causing patients to develop jaundice, a yellowing of the skin and the whites of the eyes.

Diagnosis of pancreatic cancer is divided into three categories: a small tumor confined to the pancreas (stage 1); a tumor that has grown outside the pancreas and involves blood vessels (stage 2 or 3); and a cancer that has spread to other organs, in most cases the liver (stage 4), Dr. Donahue said.

“When Wendy was first diagnosed, her tumor was partially involving some of the essential blood vessels around the pancreas. She was probably in the stage 2-3 range, a relatively early stage where it hadn’t spread to other organs,” Dr. Donahue said.

“In cases like that, we try to shrink the tumor with chemotherapy before pancreatic surgery, so hopefully we won’t have to do any major vascular work and reconstruction. We only have to remove the part of the pancreas with the tumor,” he said. “Her treatment was some chemotherapy first, then surgery, then a little more chemo to complete her course of therapy.”

Humor and positivity

Hammers recalled that when she received her diagnosis, instead of asking “Why me?” she thought, “How am I going to manage this?”

Her optimistic approach remained constant as treatment progressed. During her six-day post-surgery hospital stay, friends decorated her room with cards and flowers, they played music. She had an essential oil diffuser filled with lavender to relax her and the staff and she inhaled orange oil to mask the medicinal smell of rubbing alcohol during chemotherapy sessions.

She had mood lighting brought in to help take the focus away from the medical machinery.

“There’s no question that a positive outlook and optimism – and our partnership with patients as they try to maintain hope and an outlook that they’re going to beat this thing – certainly helps their survival and helps them tolerate their treatments better,” said Dr. Donahue. “For those who are less fortunate than Wendy, who don’t wind up beating it, a positive outlook improves their quality of life, of the time they have left.”

Dr. Donahue said he encourages his patients to think positively, despite the challenging circumstances. Hammers said she benefited directly from his coaching.

He said, “You have cancer. You’re going to be fine. I’ll be with you the whole time,” she recalled.

Hammers’ advice to others with cancer is to build a similar network of supporters.

“Choose doctors that you feel are team members,” she said. “And express yourself – that will lead to less tension, better sleep and elevation of the immune system.”

And if you can, incorporate some humor into the cancer treatment plan.

“It’s so absurd, with things hanging out of your body,” Hammers said. “You need a way to laugh at it.”

What is Pancreatitis?

Pancreatitis is an inflammatory condition of the pancreas, with both acute (short-lived) and chronic forms, and a known risk factor for developing pancreatic cancer, especially in cases of long-term chronic inflammation.

Inflammation is an important part of the body's response to infection or physical injury; it's the signal that brings in the immune cells to fight the infection or to start the healing process. Usually, when the infection or injury is resolved, inflammation stops, but sometimes, this does not happen. This is called chronic inflammation and can damage cells and tissues. While pancreatitis is rare, it is a risk factor for developing pancreatic cancer.

Acute vs Chronic Pancreatitis

- **Acute Pancreatitis:** This is a sudden inflammation often caused by gallstones that physically block the vessels of the pancreas or with heavy alcohol consumption. The main symptom is severe abdominal pain. While it usually affects just the pancreas, it can sometimes be more widespread and life-threatening.
- **Chronic Pancreatitis:** This type involves long-term inflammation that damages the pancreas tissue over time and can decrease the ability of the pancreas to function. A mixture of risk factors includes chronic alcohol use, tobacco use, and inherited genetic mutations. As the pancreas gets damaged, it can lead to issues like weight loss, malnutrition, and diabetes, and it raises the risk

of pancreatic cancer.

Pancreatitis is generally considered acute (short-lived) or chronic, but there is a spectrum of disease between these two designations. Patients can have one acute case over the course of their lives or multiple episodes, and acute pancreatitis, when not treated, can lead to chronic pancreatitis.

Chronic Pancreatitis & Substance Abuse

Alcohol abuse can cause chronic pancreatitis and increase the risk of developing pancreatic ductal adenocarcinoma (PDAC), the most common form of pancreatic cancer. The risk is further increased in those patients who also smoke. As the body breaks down alcohol, it generates byproducts that can be toxic to cells. If there is a buildup of these toxic byproducts, an increase in digestive enzymes can occur. An overproduction of these enzymes, meant to break down protein in our foods, can disrupt the cells of the pancreas and lead to further health problems.

While genetics and inherited conditions are beyond our control, we can limit inflammation and reduce risk factors. [Ongoing research](#) aims to find better treatments and improve outcomes for pancreatitis patients. If you or a loved one has pancreatitis and needs help, please contact [Patient Support](#).

An overview of KRAS and it's

importance in pancreatic cancer

Cancer arises from genetic mutations or changes in the DNA that allows cells to grow unregulated. Healthy cells don't divide unless given signals from the environment to initiate proliferation, mutations that allow a cell to grow, divide, or survive indiscriminately will initiate cancer. The *RAS* family of genes is made up of *KRAS*, *NRAS*, and *HRAS* and these genes encode proteins involved in telling a cell to start to undergo replication and division. While *HRAS* and *NRAS* mutations are found in 2.4 and 5.5% of cancers, respectively, *KRAS* mutations are the most commonly occurring *RAS* mutations in cancer found in about 20% of all cancer patients. [1] *KRAS* is mutated in colorectal cancer, lung cancer, and most prominently in pancreatic cancer.

KRAS mutations are found in over 85% of pancreatic ductal adenocarcinomas (PDACs; the most common form of pancreatic cancer) and are the first mutation, known as the driver mutation, for PDAC kicking off transformation from healthy cell to cancer cell. [1,2,3] *KRAS** protein generally exists in its inactive form. When *KRAS* becomes activated, it signals through multiple pathways that allow a cell to grow, divide, and survive. Mutations in the *KRAS* gene result in *KRAS* protein that is always active, disconnecting growth and division from the normal directions a healthy cell receives. This unchecked proliferation allows for the addition of more genetic mutations that are known to accumulate as a healthy cell turns into precancerous lesions (pancreatic intraepithelial neoplasms or PanINs) then pancreatic cancer during the progression of PDAC.

One reason that *KRAS* mutations are so prevalent in cancer is

because there are multiple mutations that can lead to unregulated activation. Proteins are made up of amino acids put together by the code of the gene's DNA. Some genetic mutations swap out amino acids in a protein in a way that affects the function of the protein. In KRAS there are three amino acids that are seen mutated frequently, glycine 12 (G12), glycine 13 (G13), and glutamine 61 (Q61). [1,2,3] These amino acids can get replaced by a number of different amino acids that all result in an activated KRAS protein. G12 mutations are the most commonly seen in more than 90% of PDACs and the most common of these is G12D (glycine replaced with aspartic acid) seen in ~ 40% of PDAC tumors (Table 1).

Since *KRAS* mutations are the initiating event in PDAC and also found in other cancers, targeting *KRAS* for therapy is an area of active research. Researchers have looked for drugs that could block the activation of KRAS or the function of active KRAS but that has been difficult to date. The structure of KRAS protein doesn't have any obvious places where a drug could bind to and inhibit KRAS activity in this way. However, new advances have recently led to the discovery of inhibitors to specific KRAS mutations (Table 1) and these drugs are being tested in clinical trials alone and in combination with other types of therapy.

Inhibitors targeting G12C mutations were the first developed, have been tested in multiple clinical trials (Table 1) and have shown promising results for lung cancer. However, this specific mutation is only present in ~1% of PDACs. Many of these agents are also early in clinical trials and results have yet to be reported. Agents targeting the more prevalent *KRAS* G12D mutation in PDAC are starting to enter the clinic with promising preclinical data but are yet to report clinical results for PDAC patients. Additionally, other ways to target KRAS have been developed and include pan-RAS inhibitors (that target mutant and wild-type* RAS), KRAS degraders (agents that destroy mutant KRAS

proteins) and siRNA technology (instructs the cell not to produce mutant KRAS proteins). Like most targeted therapies, resistance is expected to develop underlining the need to test these KRAS targeted therapies in combination with other types of drugs for optimal responses.

Mutation	Frequency in PDAC	Therapies in development
G12D	~40%	MRTX1133, RMX-9805, HRS-4642
G12V	~30%	
G12R	~15%	
Q61H	5%	
G12C	1%	Multiple agents in the clinic for multiple indications: Sotorasib(AMG510), Adagrasib (MRTX849), Divarasil (GDC-6036), MK-1084, Garsorasib, JDQ443, IBI351, BEBT-607, BI-1823911, BPI-421286, D3S-001, GEC255, HBI-2438, Ly3537982, RMC-6291, HS-10370, Glecirasib, and YL-15293
G12S	<1%	
G12L	<1%	
Q61K	<1%	
Q61R	<1%	
A11T	<1%	
G13P	<1%	
G13D	<1%	
Q61H/G12D	<1%	

Table generated with data from [refs 1,2,3]

References

- [1] Waters and Der. 2018. Cold Spring Harb Perspect Med
- [2] Linehan, McDermott, and O’Kane. 2024. Front. Med.
- [3] Luo J. 2021. Semin Oncol

*Genes are *italicized* and proteins are not, which is why KRAS is sometimes italicized but other times isn’t, *KRAS* is the gene and KRAS is the protein.

*When a gene does not carry a genetic mutation it is referred to as “wild-type” and when a gene has changes in the DNA when compared to the wild type sequence it is referred to as “mutant”

Level up your giving with a Donor-Advised Fund (DAF)

The Hirshberg Foundation has partnered with DAF Day for a new way to make a difference. On October 10, 2024, we’ll be joining a collaborative group of leading nonprofits, fundraising platforms, and providers of Donor-Advised Funds (DAFs) for a single day of unprecedented generosity. DAF Day is a new kind of giving day that reframes how Donor-Advised Funds are used and who uses them.

A Donor-Advised Fund is one of philanthropy’s fastest-growing vehicles today. As the Hirshberg Foundation drives research forward and provides critical services for patients and families, we understand that you want your contributions to make a significant impact. By opening a [Donor-Advised Fund](#) (DAF), you can easily amplify the value of your annual donations and make a difference.

You might think that Donor-Advised Funds (DAFs) are only for the financially established, but that’s a common misconception. By

opening a DAF (with no minimum amount required), you can start making contributions to let those funds grow tax-free until you're ready to donate! You can even give your DAF account a name that's meaningful to you and your loved ones.

Young donors are opening brokerage accounts and financial literacy is woven into pop-culture. The reality is that teenagers are investing more than ever as well. You're never too young or too old to set a goal to donate to your favorite charity every year.

Here's how a Donor-Advised Fund will change the way you give, create a new financial vehicle to grow your wealth, and allow you to make a greater impact in the fight against pancreatic cancer.

WHAT IS A DAF?

Donor-Advised Funds (DAF) began to grow in visibility and popularity in the 1990's, and today they are philanthropy's fastest-growing vehicles. A DAF is an easy, tax-smart investment option for charitable giving. To put it simply: a DAF is an account set up through a brokerage firm where you can contribute cash and non-cash assets, invest, allow funds to grow over time, and then make an even bigger tax-free donation!

WHAT ARE THE REQUIREMENTS?

If you're a U.S. permanent resident with a social security number, you've met the criteria. You likely already have a checking and savings account – to start a Donor-Advised Fund you'll simply open a brokerage account and fill out a form. Banks like Wells Fargo, Charles Schwab, Vanguard, and Fidelity offer DAF accounts as well as online apps like Daffy and Charityvest. You may already have an account used to invest in stocks, save for retirement, or set aside money for your child's college fund. Sign in to your account and visit the charitable giving section.

WHAT ARE THE STEPS TO MAKE A DAF GIFT?

There are three simple steps to get the ball rolling:

1. Open an account and contribute cash, assets, or investments
2. Invest by selecting from some optional investment pools
3. Grant funds to a public charity such as the Hirshberg Foundation

HOW TO PERSONALIZE YOUR DAF...

When you create your Donor-Advised Fund, there will be a moment when it's clear just how meaningful this financial step is for you personally. It's the moment when you name your DAF. This is an opportunity to name it after your family or a loved one. You'll often find DAFs named "the Johnson Family Fund" or named after a loved one, such as "the Sharon Smith Fund."

Questions about Donor-Advised Fund giving? Contact Sarah Banks, Development Director sbanks@pancreatic.org or (310) 473-5121.

Researchers receive \$4 million to advance immunotherapy treatment for pancreatic cancer

We are proud to share that our collaborative efforts with the UCLA Health Jonsson Comprehensive Cancer Center have led to a transformative \$4 million grant from the National Cancer Institute (NCI). This grant aims to advance immune-based

therapies for pancreatic ductal adenocarcinoma (PDAC) to improve treatment and patient outcomes.

Immunotherapy employs drugs to boost the immune system's ability to identify and attack cancer cells. Under the guidance of [Dr. Timothy Donahue](#), Director of the Agi Hirshberg Center for Pancreatic Diseases, [Dr. Zev Wainberg](#), co-director of the UCLA Health GI Oncology Program, and [Dr. Caius Radu](#), professor of molecular and medical pharmacology, a multidisciplinary team is delving deep into the role of adenosine in the immune suppression associated with pancreatic cancer. Their work seeks to understand how adenosine, a molecule in the body, affects the tumor environment and interactions between immune and cancer cells.

The grant will also fund a follow-up clinical trial examining a small molecule inhibitor combined with the existing combination of PD-1, an immunotherapy drug, and chemotherapy before surgery. Building on promising initial results, this trial seeks to diminish adenosine production within tumors, potentially boosting the immune system's ability to fight cancer more effectively. Previous Hirshberg Foundation [Seed Grant](#) Awardees, Dr. Thuc Le and Dr. Evan Abt, have also been working to study adenosine.

“By introducing a small molecule inhibitor to the existing chemotherapy and PD-1 inhibition regimen, we hope to limit adenosine production in the tumor microenvironment, thereby enhancing the immune response against the cancer,” said Donahue in the article published by UCLA Health. “We are hopeful this strategy will help the body's natural defenses fight the cancer more effectively, leading to better treatments for people with pancreatic cancer.”

This substantial grant is a beacon of hope. We are optimistic

that this research will uncover new therapeutic strategies that target adenosine, enhancing patient outcomes and leading to better treatments.