

# A better Life

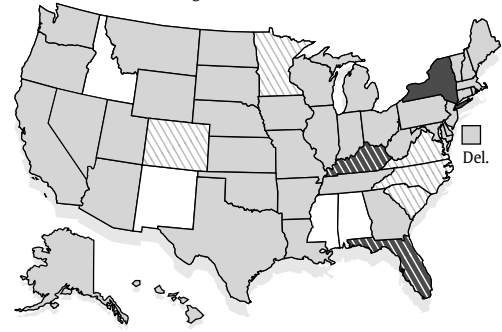
Health, education & science

## Tracking the flu

Week ending Dec. 11

Although New York state reported widespread flu activity and two other states reported regional activity, federal health officials say the overall flu activity in the USA remains low.

- No activity**  
No lab-confirmed cases and no increase in flu-like illness.
- Sporadic**  
Small numbers of lab-confirmed flu or a single outbreak, but no increase in cases of flu-like illness.
- Local**  
Outbreaks of flu or increases in flu-like cases and lab-confirmed influenza in a single region.
- Regional**  
Outbreaks of flu or increases in flu-like illness and recent lab-confirmed flu in at least two but less than half the regions of the state.
- Widespread**  
Outbreaks of flu or increases in flu-like cases and recent lab-confirmed flu in at least half the regions of the state.



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention USA TODAY

### Flu vaccine to get wider distribution, 8D



By Al Behrman, AP

**At the Dayton Art Institute:** The Nativity scene by Mary Toya of Jemez Pueblo, N.M., has a cornhusk star.

## Crèches illuminate cultural differences

Baby Jesus wears blue jeans and a Western shirt. The Wise Men are Indian chiefs, one in full headdress. The University of Dayton in Ohio has collected 1,200 Nativity scenes from 45 countries, and one thing stands out: Crèches reveal what's important to a culture. Artists wrap the birth of Jesus in their local customs, costumes and values. The Pueblo Indian scene with Jesus in jeans is just one example. A clown is in one German scene. In a Mexican set, Mary and Jesus lie in the sand surrounded by pottery figures in sombreros. "We quite rightly should want to see Nativity scenes in all the different cultures," says Robin Margaret Jensen, professor of the history of Christian art and worship at Vanderbilt University. "We don't know what Mary and Jesus looked like. It addresses the problem of always showing them as Western Europeans."



NASA/JPL/Space Science Institute, via AP

**Moon over Saturn:** A flyby shows that tectonic fractures have left ice cliffs on Dione.

### Cassini finds icy cliffs on Saturn moons

The Cassini-Huygens spacecraft's flybys of two of Saturn's moons, Dione and Titan, have revealed vast cliffs of ice and hidden clouds, NASA scientists say. A small icy moon, Dione had been thought since a 1980 Voyager 1 mission to be coated with wisps of ice. But a closer passage reveals those wisps are actually tall ice cliffs fracturing the moon's frozen crust, says mission imaging chief Carolyn Porco of the Space Science Institute in Boulder, Colo. Titan, the second-largest moon in the solar system, shows evidence of low-altitude clouds. Measurements of Titan's atmosphere reveal that conditions are perfect for the January landing of the Huygens probe on the moon. Cassini is on a four-year mission to explore Saturn and its 31 moons.

### Gun research inconclusive, panel finds

Firearms research is too inadequate to support, or argue against, laws and programs aimed at preventing gun violence, says an expert panel. Nationwide, about 12,000 people are victims of homicide and about 17,000 commit suicide by gunfire every year. The National Academy of Sciences panel last week found that weak data and poor funding of research leave little support for "right to carry" laws, for violence-prevention programs aimed at discouraging kids from using guns or for laws targeting crimes committed with guns. "A comprehensive research program on firearms is needed if criminal-justice and crime-prevention policy is to have a sound basis," the panel concludes.

### FDA OKs drug for macular degeneration

The Food and Drug Administration on Friday approved the drug Macugen to treat age-related macular degeneration, the leading cause of blindness in older Americans. The drug attacks the rapidly progressing "wet" type of AMD, affecting an estimated 1.6 million Americans over 50, in which new blood vessels form behind the retina and then leak, damaging the macula. Macugen inhibits the protein VEGF, slowing the growth of these blood vessels. Donald D'Amico of Harvard Medical School, who conducted clinical trials, says untreated patients had about a 45% chance of significant vision loss in a year compared with 30% of those treated with Macugen. Macugen, or pegaptanib sodium injection, is being jointly developed and marketed by Eyetech Pharmaceuticals and Pfizer Inc. It is expected to be available early next year.

From staff and wire reports  
E-mail Betterlife@usatoday.com

# Aurora's brief, brave battle

## Pancreatic cancer advanced with ruthless speed

By Evelyn Tan Powers  
USA TODAY

I got my first inkling that something was wrong with my normally energetic 76-year-old mother when she returned in May from a two-month Asian vacation. She got off the plane on a wheelchair.

Two weeks later, her doctor confided to me that she suspected pancreatic cancer, adding that "it's really not a good cancer to have."

Four months later, Mama was dead. At the time, I knew nothing about cancer of the pancreas. I soon learned that her doctor's warning was, if anything, an understatement.

Of the 31,860 Americans diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 2004, only 24% were expected to live at least a year, according to the American Cancer Society. Chances for survival depend on whether the cancer is found early enough, before it has spread. After detection, the patient can undergo a pancreaticoduodenectomy, commonly called a "Whipple procedure," in which the gallbladder, common bile duct, part of the duodenum and the head of the pancreas are removed.

For most patients with inoperable pancreatic cancer, the standard treatment is a drug called Gemzar.

The pancreas, an oblong gland that is integral to the digestive system, is deep inside the abdomen. Therefore, a doctor cannot feel a tumor on the pancreas during a routine physical exam. In most cases, there are no signs until the tumor has grown large enough to affect other organs, causing such symptoms as pain.

My mother started to feel ill in late March. She lost her appetite and dropped 10 pounds in just weeks. She became fatigued and noticed a dull ache in her abdomen.

After her return home to Northern Virginia in late May, tests determined that she had a 4-centimeter tumor on her pancreas, and there were signs it had spread to her liver, gallbladder and lymph nodes. The surgeon at Johns Hopkins University Hospital in Baltimore, where we took her for a second opinion, confirmed that her cancer was too advanced for surgery.

Because pancreatic cancer is so hard to treat, doctors often encourage their patients to join clinical trials. Clinical trials give patients access to new, experimental drugs and treatments. The first phase tests for safety and the second phase for effectiveness. In Phase III trials, which involve more people and compare the new treatment with the current standard treatment, participants are usually randomly assigned to the standard-treatment group or the new-treatment group.

My mother was diagnosed after a locally administered Phase III trial had stopped taking new patients.

My research found that, even with treatment, she probably would die within the year. The oncologist told us that although chemotherapy could improve her quality of life, it might not prolong her survival significantly. But it was the only option that remained. We decided not to delay treatment any longer. On July 6, she began weekly 30-minute infusions of Gemzar.

On July 15, we took her to Georgetown University Hospital in Washington, D.C., for a third opinion. The oncologist there called Gemzar a "reasonable" option for a septuagenarian.

Mama tolerated chemo reasonably

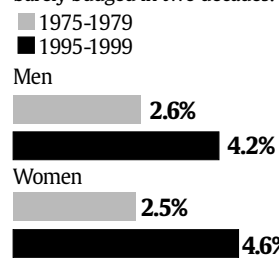


Undated family photo

**Illness detected too late:** Evelyn Tan Powers with her mother, Aurora Dy Tan. Dy Tan was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in late May, when it already had spread to major organs; she lost her battle in late September.

### A few more survivors

Although chemotherapy has helped people with pancreatic cancer live slightly longer than in the past, the number who survive five years or more has barely budged in two decades.



Source: American Cancer Society  
By Adrienne Lewis, USA TODAY



Family photo

**Early days:** Aurora Dy Tan, left, with son Edwin, daughter Evelyn and husband Johnny in 1957.



Family photo

### Support system:

Aurora, center, with sisters Remy, left, and Mia. Remy helped care for Aurora when she fell ill.

from her abdomen to a drainage bag. I began spending nights with her. My father, my brother, Edwin, my Aunt Remy and my husband, Paul, stayed with her during the daytime.

Mama felt better briefly. She'd wake me away when I tried to give her a hand, saying, "I want to do it myself."

But her pain became worse, and she was put on morphine. Her pulse rate went up, and her blood pressure plummeted. She slipped into a coma the morning of Sept. 21. The oncologist diagnosed liver failure. The end could come in days, the doctor said, but it would be painless.

We made plans for in-home hospice care. When I left the hospital on the morning of Sept. 22, my brother was swabbing Mama's chapped lips with water. I went to her house to await a phone call from the hospice people to set a time for delivering a hospital bed.

Instead, when the phone rang, it was my brother telling me that our mother had died.

There are no tests to detect pancreatic cancer early. Hope is growing that cancer will become a manageable chronic illness. But for those whose tumors originate on the pancreas, it is still very close to a death sentence.

### Log on and learn

Find more information about pancreatic cancer on these Web sites:

- **American Cancer Society:** www.cancer.org
- **National Cancer Institute:** www.nci.nih.gov/cancertopics/types/pancreatic
- **The Johns Hopkins University Hospital:** www.path.jhu.edu/pancreas
- **Pancreatic Cancer Action Network:** www.pancreas.org
- **The Lustgarten Foundation:** www.lustgartenfoundation.org

well. She didn't lose her hair. Her worst side effects were fatigue, mouth sores, afternoon chills and night sweats. On Aug. 18, she turned 77. We feasted on her favorite soft-shell crab dish and talked wistfully about things she would do, trips she would take, after she got better.

In early September, her complexion began turning yellow. "Ma, you look like a Magic Marker," I said, but inside I was terrified.

The jaundice got worse. On Sept. 8 she entered the hospital.

Without a surgical procedure to drain her bile and relieve her jaundice, she would never be able to have chemotherapy again, the oncologist said. She would die in a few months. On the other hand, surgery could make her feel worse in the short run.

Never one to surrender, my mother opted for surgery. She returned to her hospital room with a tube that went

# Progress for pancreatic cancer fight is slow

## Some treatments look promising

By Liz Szabo  
USA TODAY

Although the outlook for most people with pancreatic cancer today is bleak, researchers believe that improved screening methods and experimental treatments may someday give patients more hope.

New experiments involve screening people who are at high risk for pancreatic cancer because they have two or more close relatives with the disease, says Margaret Tempero, a pancreatic cancer expert at the University of California-San Francisco.

Doctors can examine and even X-ray the pancreas with specialized scopes, then remove premalignant lesions or early cancers. The procedures also allow doctors to get a better idea of how pancreatic tumors begin and develop.

But removing part of the pancreas can cause serious health problems, Tempero says. And only about 5% of pancreatic

cancers are inherited. Doctors have no way to screen the general public.

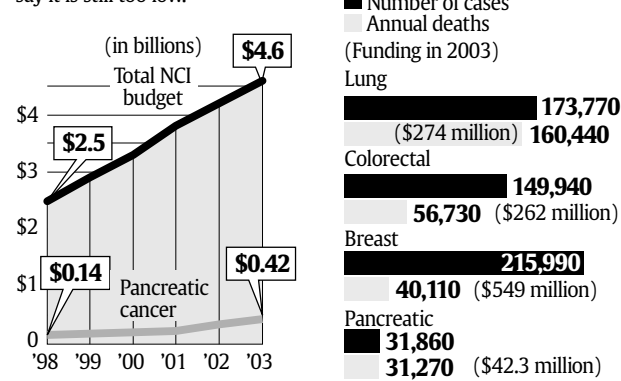
Pancreatic cancer patients may benefit from the growing field of "targeted therapies," or drugs designed to selectively block certain signals inside tumor cells, experts say. Although these new drugs are approved for other types of tumors, doctors are eager to see whether they will work on pancreatic cancers.

Some targeted therapies and other promising treatments include:

► **Tarceva.** This pill silences growth signals that allow cancer cells to divide wildly. In a clinical trial of nearly 600 pancreatic cancer patients, those who added Tarceva to standard chemotherapy lived an average of 6.4 months, while those on chemo alone lived 5.9 months. At the end of one year, 25% of patients who took the Tarceva combination were alive, compared with 19% of the others, says John Hamm of Norton Healthcare

### Funding for pancreatic cancer research low

Funding for pancreatic cancer has tripled since 1998, but critics say it is still too low.



Source: American Cancer Society, National Cancer Institute  
By Adrienne Lewis, USA TODAY

mor cells, while Tarceva works inside the cell.

► **Avastin.** This drug aims to starve tumors by cutting off their blood supplies.

► **BAY 43-9006.** This experimental therapy combines the tumor-fighting strategies of all these drugs. It halts chemical signals that lead to blood-vessel growth. It also switches off signals produced by mutation in a gene called RAS. About 90% of pancreatic cancers carry this mutation, according to Onyx Pharmaceuticals, which is developing BAY 43-9006 with

Bayer.

► **Vaccines.** Unlike traditional vaccines, these experimental therapies — including GVAX from Cell Genesys and PANVAC-VF from Therion Biologics — aim to treat tumors, rather than prevent them. Researchers hope the vaccines will spur the immune system to recognize and kill cancer cells.

in Louisville, who has conducted trials of Tarceva for three years.

► **Erbtux.** In a trial of 41 patients, 32% lived at least a year, according to research published in July in the *Journal of Clinical Oncology*. Although Erbitux and Tarceva both target the same growth-promoting enzyme, Erbitux blocks a part of the enzyme on the surface of tu-