

Prostate Cancer Screening

What is the prostate gland?

The prostate gland is a doughnut-shaped gland under your bladder. The urethra (the tube that carries urine out of your body) goes through the middle of the prostate gland. The prostate is about the size of a walnut (see the picture to the right). The prostate gland makes a fluid that carries sperm during ejaculation. As you get older, your prostate can become larger. It can also become stiff. This can cause urinary problems. This condition is called benign (meaning it's not cancer) enlargement, or benign prostatic hypertrophy.

What are the symptoms of prostate cancer?

Sometimes prostate cancer causes problems like those that occur with benign enlargement. These symptoms include slowing of the urinary stream, a feeling of not fully emptying the bladder after you urinate, waking several times in the night to urinate, and having blood in the urine. Sometimes weight loss or back pain can be the first sign of prostate cancer if the cancer has already spread to other areas of the body. In most men, however, prostate cancer causes few symptoms until it becomes very advanced.

How is prostate cancer diagnosed?

Prostate cancer can be diagnosed by physical exam of the rectum (the area where the prostate can best be felt) and a blood test. In the rectal exam, your doctor puts a gloved, lubricated finger a few inches into your rectum to feel your prostate gland. Prostate cancer is suspected if any part of the gland feels hard. The blood test for prostate cancer is called PSA. This test is often used together with the rectal exam to find prostate cancer.

The PSA blood test checks the level of prostate-specific antigen in your blood. The PSA level should be lower than 4 ng per mL in men who are 50 to 60 years of age. The normal PSA level in men 40 to 50 years of age is 2.5 ng per mL. A PSA level higher than 4 ng per mL might mean you have prostate cancer. However, some things other than cancer can also cause an increase in the PSA level. These things include recent sexual activity, recent urinary infection, prostate gland infection and benign prostate enlargement.

If your doctor thinks you have prostate cancer, based on the rectal exam and/or the PSA test, a biopsy (taking a small piece of tissue to look at) is usually done to check the diagnosis. A biopsy takes about 15 minutes and usually doesn't cause pain. It's important to stop taking all aspirin and aspirin-like medicines for 10 days before you have the biopsy. To prevent infection, you will be given an antibiotic to take before the test.

An ultrasound machine takes pictures of the prostate gland before the biopsy. A small probe is put into your rectum, and the pictures of the prostate are taken. The doctor uses these pictures to guide the needle as it takes tissue samples for the biopsy. A doctor looks at the samples under a microscope to check for cancer cells. The side effects of the biopsy are usually mild. You might have a little blood in your urine and stool for a few days, and some rectal discomfort.

Should I be tested for prostate cancer?

The risk of getting prostate cancer is higher in some men than in others. If you are black or if you have a father, a brother or an uncle with prostate cancer, you should probably get a rectal exam beginning when you are age 40. If you are at high risk of prostate cancer or are concerned about it, you should talk to your doctor about whether to have the PSA test. The test isn't perfect. For example, it may show an elevated level of prostate specific antigen when you don't have cancer. Your doctor can help you decide if the PSA test would be helpful.

When deciding whether to be tested, you should consider that many forms of prostate cancer don't cause symptoms or shorten your life. Most cases of prostate cancer grow very slowly and tend to occur in older men. Heart disease, diabetes, stroke and pneumonia are greater threats in most men than prostate cancer. Simple things like quitting smoking, exercising regularly and eating low-fat foods may do more to prolong life than diagnosing and treating prostate cancer.

On the other hand, more than 40,000 men die every year from prostate cancer in the United States. Surgery and radiation treatments can cure prostate cancer if it's caught early, especially in middle-aged men. However, once the cancer has spread to other parts of the body, no treatment can cure it.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

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