

Prostate Cancer

What is the prostate gland?

The prostate gland is part of the male reproductive system. The prostate makes a fluid that mixes with sperm and other fluids during ejaculation. A normal prostate is about the size of a walnut.

What is prostate cancer?

Cancer is when cells in the body grow out of control. Prostate cancer is a group of abnormal cells in the prostate.

Prostate cancer can be aggressive, which means it grows quickly and spreads to other parts of the body. (When cancer spreads, doctors say the cancer has "metastasized.") Patients with slow-growing cancer can expect to live as long as men who do not have cancer. Most patients with slow-growing cancer will never have symptoms. Three out of four cases of prostate cancer are of the slow-growing type that is relatively harmless.

Who is at risk for prostate cancer?

Prostate cancer is the most common type of cancer found in American men, other than skin cancer. The American Cancer Society estimates that there will be about 179,300 new cases of prostate cancer in the United States this year, and about 37,000 men will die of this disease. For an American man, the lifetime risk of dying from prostate cancer is 3.4%.

Although men of any age can get prostate cancer, it is found most often in men over age 50. In fact, more than 8 of 10 men with prostate cancer are over the age of 65.

African-American men are at higher risk than Caucasian men. Men with a family history of prostate cancer are at higher risk too. Family history means that your father or a brother had prostate cancer.

Possible Symptoms of Prostate Cancer

Call your doctor if you have any of these symptoms:

- Difficulty starting to urinate
- Less force to the stream of urine

- Dribbling after you finish urinating
- Frequent urination
- Blood or pus in the urine
- Pain or burning feeling while urinating
- Pain with ejaculation
- Hip or back pain that does not go away over time

How does my doctor check my prostate?

Your doctor may examine your prostate by putting a gloved, lubricated finger a few inches into your rectum to feel your prostate gland. This is called a digital rectal exam. A normal prostate feels firm. If there are hard spots on the prostate, your doctor may suspect cancer.

What is the PSA test?

Another way to check for prostate cancer is with a blood test called the PSA test. PSA is short for prostate-specific antigen. Men who have prostate cancer may have a higher level of PSA in their blood. However, the PSA level can also be high because of other, less serious causes such as infection.

Who should be screened?

Screening means looking for cancer before it causes symptoms. Some doctors recommend that men at high risk--African-American men and men with a family history of prostate cancer--should be screened.

The National Cancer Institute, the American Cancer Society, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force and the American Academy of Family Physicians recommend that men talk to their doctors about whether screening is needed.

What are the disadvantages of screening?

One of the reasons that doctors disagree about the need for screening is that although screening for prostate cancer finds many cases of cancer, it also finds conditions that aren't cancer. This means that some men may have to go through unneeded tests and worry to make sure that they don't have cancer.

In addition, PSA screening detects many cases of slow-growing cancers that cause few if any problems. Although these cancers can be treated, there's no proof that treatment helps men live longer. And treatment may be worse than the cancer itself. Treatment can cause serious problems, such as impotence (inability to get or keep an erection) and incontinence (loss of urine).

How do I decide whether to be screened?

Talk to your doctor. And think about whether you really would want to know if you have cancer. Since many cases of prostate cancer don't cause problems or shorten a man's life, some men would rather not have the worry of knowing they have cancer.

If you think you would want to know if you have prostate cancer, ask yourself whether you would want treatment. Talk to your doctor about the known risks and uncertain benefits of treatment.

What are the treatment options for prostate cancer?

One option is "watchful waiting." Watchful waiting means leaving the cancer alone and seeing your doctor regularly so he or she can track the cancer. This may be a good option for older men and those with slow-growing cancer. Even without treatment, these men typically can expect to live as long as men who don't have prostate cancer. At any time during watchful waiting, you can choose to switch to another treatment.

Surgery, radiation and drugs are other treatment options. They can cure prostate cancer if it's caught early. However, these treatments can cause serious problems, such as impotence and incontinence. Surgery or radiation may help treat the more aggressive cancers that are most often found in middle-aged men.