

Screening for Prostate Cancer

This guidance provides information about screening for prostate cancer using the Prostate Specific Antigen (PSA) test.

There are sometimes serious risks associated with properly diagnosing and treating prostate cancer, which makes it a very difficult area for both clinicians and patients.

Unfortunately, the most commonly used test to help find prostate cancer, the PSA test, is not a perfect test. It can be a helpful step in diagnosing prostate cancer at the earliest opportunity, however, you should understand the pros and cons of the test, helping you make a well informed decision about whether it's right for you or not.

About prostate cancer

Only men have a prostate gland. It's usually about the size of a walnut and it gets larger as you get older. Its main function is to help make semen, the fluid that carries sperm.

Prostate cancer is the most common cancer in men in the UK. It develops when cells in the prostate gland start to grow in an uncontrolled way. About 1 in 8 men will get prostate cancer at some point in their lives, however, it usually only affects men over 50. Risk levels increase with age.

You are at greater risk of if you are black, or if have a father or brother who has prostate cancer at a younger age.

Symptoms of prostate cancer

In its early stages, prostate cancer often doesn't have any symptoms. The main symptoms may be trouble urinating, although there are many other reasons this could be caused, including benign prostate enlargement and it doesn't mean you will have prostate cancer.

If you're over 50, any pain occurring in the back, hips or pelvis that doesn't settle down quickly is worth mentioning to your doctor. Again, symptoms like this do not mean you have prostate cancer, but it's worth being aware of them.

Screening tests

There is no perfect test to find prostate cancer in people who don't have any symptoms. The PSA test can't tell on its own whether you have prostate cancer, or another health problem.

Raised PSA levels can also be caused an enlarged prostate, urine infections or prostatitis (infection or inflammation of the prostate) – none of which are cancers.

Because of this, some clinicians believe that screening (testing when you do not have any symptoms) for prostate cancer could do more harm than good.

Diagnosing prostate cancer

Tests for prostate cancer can't always tell for sure whether the cancer is fast-growing or slow-growing. Prostate cancer often grows very slowly and has a low risk of spreading, so it may not cause you serious problems during your natural lifetime. Sometimes regular monitoring, rather than direct treatment, may be the best course of action if it is diagnosed.

Some tests that are used to make a definitive diagnosis of prostate cancer, like biopsies, can cause serious side effects, including problems getting an erection, urinary problems and bowel problems. Because many prostate cancers may not affect a mans' health, this may mean that any treatment may have been unnecessary.

Treatments for prostate cancer

Treatments for confirmed cases of prostate cancer depend greatly on each individual case, however, they are likely to involve chemotherapy (treatment with drugs), radiotherapy (treatment with targeted radiation) or surgery, all of which can also have side-effects and other risks.

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How to decide whether to have the test?

There are some clear pros and cons to having the PSA test, which we've listed below to help you make an informed decision about whether to have the test or not.

Scientific studies have not shown any direct benefit from population screening for prostate cancer. That is to say there is no definitive evidence that prostate cancer screening saves lives. Unless you are in a high risk group, we would not normally suggest a PSA test if you are under 50 years old.

Ultimately, it's a personal choice, but one that can and should be discussed with a doctor, considering your own circumstances, health and personal views.

| Advantages | Disadvantages |
|---|---|
| You could find prostate cancer before symptoms present – treatment outcomes are often better if you catch a cancer as early as possible | Having a raised PSA level doesn't mean you have prostate cancer – most men who have raised PSA levels don't have prostate cancer. |
| You may find a fast-growing cancer and be able to stop it spreading. | If your PSA level is raised you may need more tests, such as a biopsy. These tests can have serious risks too, like infection or erectile dysfunction. |
| You may be able to confirm if a cancer is slow-growing, in which case regular monitoring, rather than treatment, may be the best option. | The PSA test is not perfect and it may not find a cancer, even if it's there already – 2% of all patients with fast-growing prostate cancer do not have raised PSA levels. |
| Regular tests may help if you're at high-risk, although there's currently very little consensus about how frequently you should be tested if you're in a high-risk group. | You might be diagnosed with a slow-growing cancer which may not have shortened your life. Being diagnosed will cause serious anxiety and you might decide to have treatment that you may not have needed. |

Unfortunately, there's currently not enough medical evidence to indicate the best path for every patient and the best guidance is that a fully informed, personal decision should be made, having considered the pros and the cons of the test. Speaking to your doctor is always a good step.

It's worth considering these questions to help you decide whether to have the test:

- Are you in a higher-risk group?
- Would you feel better if you got a normal result?
- What would you do if your PSA level was raised?
- If you were diagnosed with a slow-growing prostate cancer, which may not cause you any problems during your natural life, would you still want to have treatment which also has risks?

Other sources of information:

www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk/prostate

NHS information about the advantages and disadvantages of the PSA test.

www.prostatecanceruk.org

The leading charity with lots of useful information about the disease. Prostate Cancer UK also has Specialist Nurses you can speak to on 0800 074 8383.

If you would like any further information, please contact our team on **020 7489 1136**.