

# PSA test for prostate cancers

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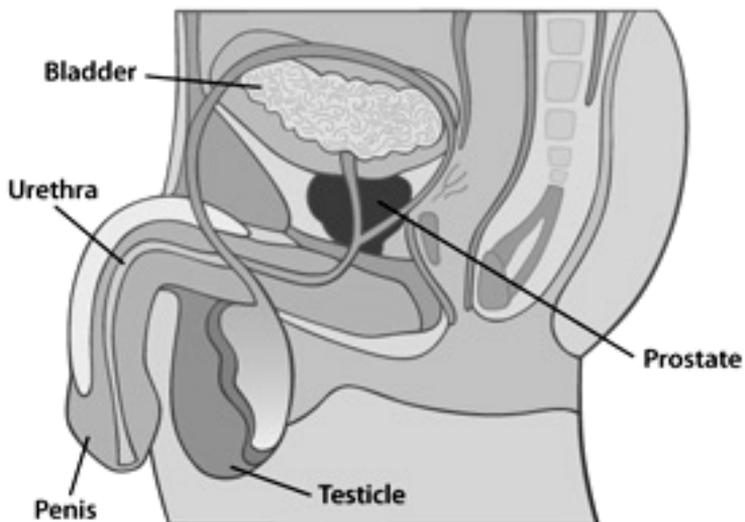
This leaflet is designed to help you decide whether to have the PSA blood test for prostate cancer. You might not have any symptoms but just want to check that you don't have prostate cancer or you might be thinking about the test because you've developed prostate symptoms.

There is no right or wrong decision - even the experts don't have all the answers. With the help of this leaflet, and your doctor, you should try to make the best decision for you.

### **What do we know about prostate cancer?**

Prostate cancer is the second most common cancer in men and around 10,000 men die from it every year in the UK. We don't know what causes it, but it is generally a disease of older men and it's rare under the age of 50.

Unlike a lot of other cancers, most prostate cancers grow very slowly and may never cause any problems at all during a man's life. That's particularly true of men in their 70s or 80s. On the other hand, some types of prostate cancer can grow quickly causing pain in the bones and eventual death.



## What are the symptoms of prostate cancer?

Men with early prostate cancer are unlikely to have any symptoms at all. As a cancer grows, it can cause the following symptoms:

- difficulty in passing urine
- passing urine more often, especially at night
- rarely, blood in the urine

Most men with these symptoms won't have prostate cancer. They are more likely to be caused by other prostate problems.

## What is the PSA test?

It is a blood test. PSA (prostate specific antigen) is a substance made by the prostate gland which naturally leaks out into the bloodstream. The PSA test measures the level of PSA in your blood.

### Why have a PSA test?

The PSA test could find an early prostate cancer before you notice any symptoms or before your doctor can detect any changes in your prostate. The benefit of finding a prostate cancer at this early stage is that it might be possible to remove the cancer by an operation or destroy it with radiotherapy.

### How good a test is it?

The PSA test is not a specific test for prostate cancer. Although a raised PSA level can be a sign of prostate cancer, more often it points to something less serious like an infection in the prostate or an enlargement of the prostate that often comes with ageing. In fact, for every 100 men with a raised PSA level, only about 30 will turn out to have any cancer cells in their prostate.

It is also true that occasionally the PSA test may read 'normal' when in fact there is a cancer there. Your doctor may also want to check your prostate using a gloved finger in the rectum (back passage).

## What happens if my PSA test is high?

As a rough guide, there are three main options after a PSA test:

- PSA not raised - highly unlikely to have cancer. No further action
- PSA slightly raised - probably not cancer but might need to repeat PSA test
- PSA definitely raised - probably need a biopsy of the prostate to find out if it really is cancer

## What is a biopsy?

If your PSA is definitely raised, you will probably need to have a biopsy of your prostate. Doctors take a sample (biopsy) of the prostate so that they can look for prostate cancer cells under a microscope.

The biopsy is done while using an ultrasound scan and a probe that is passed up your rectum (back passage). This can be uncomfortable. Sometimes you might have complications such as bleeding in the urine or infection of the prostate or blood.

It is important to realise that even if the biopsy doesn't find cancer cells, it doesn't completely rule out your not having cancer. You may need to have further PSA tests and biopsies for some time afterwards.

## What if I do have early prostate cancer?

Treating some cancers while they are still small may stop them spreading and causing problems. However, doctors don't all agree on the best way to treat early prostate cancer and there is no proof that treating early cancers help men live any longer.

There are four main options if you have got early prostate cancer and they all carry some risks:

## Radical prostatectomy - removal of the entire prostate gland

Risks (estimated) - for every 1,000 men: 5 may die, up to 200

are left with urinary symptoms such as leaking urine; between 200 and 800 develop erection problems

### **Radiotherapy**

High energy rays used to kill cancer cells.

Risks - for every 1,000 men: up to 300 have bleeding or discomfort in the rectum, about 500 develop erection problems

### **Brachytherapy**

This is a version of radiotherapy using radioactive seeds inserted into the prostate.

Risks - bladder side effects may be more severe than radiotherapy but bowel problems and impotence are expected to be less of a problem

### **'Active monitoring'**

This is regular check-ups; treat only if cancer is growing.

Risks - worry of missing a growing cancer.

### **Should I have the PSA test?**

Even the medical experts are uncertain about some of the important questions about the PSA test and the best treatment for prostate cancer.

People deal with this uncertainty in different ways. Some men choose to be aggressive in looking for and treating early prostate cancers.

Others may not even want to know if they have an early prostate cancer because they think that, on balance, having that information would do them more harm than good.

## **First, bear in mind that your risk of prostate cancer increases slightly...**

- The older you are (but in older men, prostate cancer is less likely to cause problems)
- If you have close relatives who have had prostate cancer (father, brother, uncle)
- If you are of Afro-Caribbean or African-American descent

## **Possible advantages of having the PSA test:**

- It could reassure you if it's normal
- It can find cancers before any symptoms develop. Treatment in the early stages could help you live longer and avoid the complications of cancer (although there is no firm evidence that this is so)

## **Possible disadvantages of having the PSA test:**

- It could miss cancer in the prostate, and falsely reassure you that all is well
- It could lead to anxiety and a biopsy when you have no cancer
- Treatment of early prostate cancers might not help you to live longer
- The main treatments for early prostate cancer do carry risks

## **If you need further information or advice please contact:**

Urology Nurses - 01935 384 394

**If you would like this leaflet in another format or in a different language, please ask a member of staff.**

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