

The PSA test and prostate cancer

A quick guide



**PROSTATE
CANCER UK**

The PSA test measures the amount of a protein called prostate specific antigen (PSA) in your blood. A high PSA level can be a sign of a prostate problem, such as prostate cancer.

This leaflet is for men who want to find out about the PSA test, which can be used to help diagnose prostate cancer and other prostate problems.

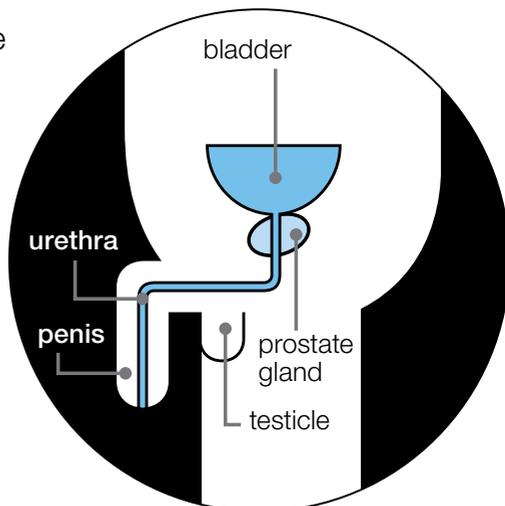
You have the right to a PSA test if you're over 50, and you've talked through the pros and cons with your doctor.

If you're worried about prostate cancer, speak to your GP or call our Specialist Nurses, in confidence, on 0800 074 8383.

What is the prostate?

Only men have a prostate gland. The prostate is usually the size and shape of a walnut and grows larger as you get older. It sits underneath the bladder and surrounds the urethra, which is the tube men pee and ejaculate through.

Its main job is to help make the semen, which is the fluid that carries sperm.



What is prostate cancer?

Prostate cancer can develop when cells in the prostate gland start to grow in an uncontrolled way.

Prostate cancer is the most common cancer in men in the UK. About 1 in 8 men will get it at some point in their lives.

Who is at risk?

You may be more likely to get prostate cancer if:



**Over the
age of 50**

you are aged 50 or over – it mainly affects men over 50 and your risk increases with age



you are Black – 1 in 4 Black men will get prostate cancer at some point in their lives

2.5x

your father or brother has had it – you are two and a half times more likely to get it if your father or brother has had it.

Are there any symptoms?

Early prostate cancer doesn't usually cause any symptoms. Some men may have problems peeing. But urinary problems are usually caused by other prostate problems which aren't cancer, like an enlarged prostate. Read more about the symptoms of prostate problems in our booklet, **Know your prostate: A guide to common prostate problems.**



For some men the first symptoms of prostate cancer might be new pain in the back, hips or pelvis. This can be caused by cancer that's spread to the bones. These symptoms are often caused by other problems such as general aches or arthritis, but you should still get them checked out if they don't settle down quickly.

If you have any symptoms, it's a good idea to get them checked out. Speak to your GP so they can find out what's causing them.

Does prostate cancer need to be treated?

This might seem like a strange question. But prostate cancer often grows slowly and has a low risk of spreading, so it may never cause you any problems or affect how long you live. Because of this, slow-growing prostate cancer might not need to be treated. You might be able to have your cancer monitored with regular check-ups instead.

Treatments for prostate cancer can cause side effects, including problems getting an erection, urinary problems and bowel problems. These can affect your daily life, although there are treatments available to help manage them.

If you're diagnosed with a slow-growing cancer, you will need to decide whether to have treatment or to have regular check-ups to try to avoid or delay treatment and side effects. Your doctor or nurse will talk to you about this.

Some men will have cancer that is fast-growing and has a high risk of spreading. This is more likely to cause problems and needs treatment to stop it spreading outside the prostate.

Tests for prostate cancer can't always tell for sure whether the cancer is fast-growing or slow-growing. If you're diagnosed with prostate cancer, your doctor will look at all your test results to get an idea of how likely it is to spread.

What is the PSA test?

The PSA test is a blood test that can be done at your GP surgery. It measures the amount of prostate specific antigen (PSA) in your blood. PSA is a protein made by the prostate. It's normal for all men to have a small amount of PSA in their blood and the amount naturally rises as you get older.

- The PSA test alone can't tell you whether you have prostate cancer.
- A raised PSA level can be a sign of prostate cancer.
- But it can't tell whether it's a slow-growing cancer – which may never cause problems or affect how long you live – or a fast-growing cancer which needs treatment.
- A raised PSA level can also be a sign of other problems such as an enlarged prostate, a urine infection or prostatitis (inflammation or infection of the prostate) – which are not cancer.

If you have a raised PSA level, you would usually need more tests to find out what's causing it.



My PSA was a little bit high, so my GP referred me to see a specialist for some more tests.

A personal experience

What are the pros and cons of having a PSA test?

There are advantages and disadvantages to having a PSA test. Talk these through with your doctor before deciding whether to have the test.

Pros

A PSA test can help pick up prostate cancer before you have any symptoms.

A PSA test may help to pick up a fast-growing cancer at an early stage when treatment may stop the cancer spreading and causing problems.

Slow-growing prostate cancer might not need treatment. You might be able to have regular check-ups, including PSA tests, to keep an eye on your cancer. This can avoid or delay the side effects of treatment.

Having regular PSA tests could be helpful for men who are more at risk of prostate cancer. This can help spot any changes in your PSA level, which might be a sign of prostate cancer. But we need more research to show how often you might need a test.

Cons

You might have a raised PSA level, even if you don't have prostate cancer. Around three quarters of men (76 per cent) with a raised PSA level don't have prostate cancer.

If your PSA level is raised you may need more tests, including a biopsy. The biopsy has some risks, such as pain, infection and blood in the urine and semen. Up to 3 in 50 men (six per cent) may get a serious infection after a biopsy.

The PSA test can miss prostate cancer. 1 in 50 men (two per cent) with fast-growing prostate cancer have a normal PSA level.

You might be diagnosed with a slow-growing prostate cancer which would never have caused you any problems or shortened your life. But being diagnosed with cancer could make you worry and you might decide to have treatment that you didn't need.

Treatments for prostate cancer have side effects which can affect your daily life. These include urinary and bowel problems, and problems getting and keeping an erection.

Know your rights

- You have the right to a PSA test if you're over 50 and you've talked through the pros and cons with your GP.
- Your GP shouldn't refuse to do the test if you're over 50 and have talked it through with them and have decided you want one.
- If you find it difficult talking to your GP about this, you could always take this leaflet with you.

Should I have a PSA test?

Talk to your GP about your risk of prostate cancer, any symptoms you might have and the pros and cons of the test. Your GP may not recommend the PSA test if you have other serious health problems which might cause you more problems than prostate cancer would.

If you're under 50 but have a higher risk of prostate cancer – because you have a family history of it or you're Black – you might want to talk to your GP about having a PSA test.

Before you decide whether to have the test, think about the information in this leaflet. Try asking yourself these questions, or discuss them with your GP.

- Are you more at risk of prostate cancer?
- If the result of your PSA test was normal, would this reassure you?
- If your PSA level was raised, what would you do?
- If you were diagnosed with slow-growing prostate cancer that might not cause you any problems in your lifetime, would you want to have treatment that could cause side effects that affect your daily life?

What happens next?

If the results show you have a raised PSA level, talk to your GP about what to do next. They may do more tests, including a DRE (digital rectal examination) where they feel your prostate through the wall of your back passage. This may be uncomfortable and some men find it embarrassing, but it will be over quickly.

Your GP might make an appointment for you to see a specialist at the hospital for more tests, including a biopsy and scans. A biopsy involves using thin needles to take small pieces of prostate tissue to check for prostate cancer. A biopsy can have side effects.

It can be difficult to decide whether or not to have a PSA test.

If you're not sure:



- speak to our Specialist Nurses on **0800 074 8383**



- read our booklet, **Understanding the PSA test: A guide for men concerned about prostate cancer**. This explains what happens if you have a PSA test, including other tests you might need to have.

Other useful organisations

Healthtalkonline

www.healthtalkonline.org

Watch, listen to and read personal experiences of men with prostate cancer and other medical conditions.

NHS Shared Decision Making

sdm.rightcare.nhs.uk

Decision aids to help people make difficult decisions about their healthcare. Includes a decision aid to help men decide whether to have a PSA test and to help them discuss this with their GP.

Prostate Cancer Risk Management Programme

www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk/prostate

NHS information about the advantages and disadvantages of the PSA test for diagnosing prostate cancer.

More information from us

The Tool Kit

The Tool Kit information pack contains fact sheets that explain how prostate cancer is diagnosed, how it's treated and how it may affect your lifestyle. Each treatment fact sheet also includes a list of suggested questions to ask your doctor.

Leaflets and booklets

We have a range of other leaflets and booklets about prostate cancer and other prostate problems.

To order publications:

All our publications are free and available to order or download online. To order them:

- Call us on **0800 074 8383**
- Visit our website at **prostatecanceruk.org/publications**

Call our Specialist Nurses

If you want to talk about prostate cancer or other prostate problems, call our Specialist Nurses in confidence. You can also email the nurses using the contact form on our website. Visit **prostatecanceruk.org** and click on 'We can help'.

References to sources of information used in the production of this leaflet and details of reviewers are available on our website.



**Speak to our
Specialist Nurses**

0800 074 8383*

prostatecanceruk.org



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To be reviewed July 2016

Call our Specialist Nurses from Mon to Fri 9am - 6pm, Wed 10am - 8pm

*Calls are recorded for training purposes only.

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