

PSA testing for you and your prostate

Get the knowledge!

What is the prostate?

Only men have a prostate and it is usually about the size of a walnut. Around the age of 40 it starts to grow or enlarge and this may cause problems for a man when passing urine or not being able to pass urine.

Where is it?

The prostate is inside the pelvis, just below the bladder and in front of the back passage. It wraps around the tube that allows urine to flow out of the bladder and for semen to pass out through the penis.

What does the prostate do?

It supplies the fluid to protect and nourish sperm during intercourse. It also makes Prostate Specific Antigen, called PSA.

What is a PSA test?

Because some PSA leaks out of the prostate, it's normal to find PSA in a man's blood. This is called your PSA level. So, a small amount of blood is taken to measure the amount of PSA in your blood. Your PSA level can be raised for a variety of reasons such as prostatitis, Benign Prostatic Hyperplasia (BPH) or prostate cancer.

A PSA test may be done

- To check for possible problems with the prostate
- If a man has problems in passing or when passing urine
- After the age of 50 as prostate problems are more likely
- When a man reaches his 40's, if a brother or father was diagnosed with prostate cancer, because it is more likely that he may develop prostate cancer
- If you are an African/Caribbean man as it is more likely that prostate cancer may develop
- If your doctor suggests the test to rule out prostate cancer

Should every man have a PSA test?

With any medical test it is best to get a clear cut answer of what the results might mean for you. The PSA test can't give such a clear cut answer. The PSA test is best used as a guide to the possibility of there being a problem with the prostate and if further investigations may be needed.

The GP can also get a clearer picture of what is going on if a digital rectal examination (DRE) is done to check the shape, size and condition of the prostate.

If you think you would like to go ahead with a PSA test, then speak with your GP.

Listed below are things to think about before going ahead with a PSA test.

Benefits of having the test

- It is a simple straight forward blood test that can be used as a guide to finding any disease in the prostate
- It may lead to detection of prostate cancer before symptoms are apparent enabling treatment to start earlier if there is cancer in the prostate
- It will give your PSA level which can be checked in the future to see if the level has gone up ie give a baseline
- It can be used to check on men who have an increased risk of prostate cancer due to a brother or father having or having had prostate cancer
- If prostate cancer is diagnosed early enough then there are several curative treatments available

Drawbacks of having the test

- The test can give a raised level even though there is no cancer present, causing the family to worry and unnecessary hospital tests for the man. This is called a false positive result
- The test can give a normal level and miss cancer so giving false reassurance. This is called a false negative result
- The test may pick up a slow growing cancer which would not cause any symptoms or shorten your life but knowing you have cancer may be worrying
- The test can indicate that there may be cancer in the prostate but can't tell if the cancer is slow growing or fast growing
- Some of the treatments for prostate cancer can have potential side-effects that may have some impact on your quality of life

Discussing the PSA test with your doctor or health care professional

Within the Prostate Cancer Risk Management pack, the guidance for GPs states that: "Any man over 50 who asks for a PSA test after careful consideration of the implications should be given one."

So, look at the lists above, think about why YOU want to have a PSA test then write down your reasons so that you can talk it over with your doctor.

Your GP may feel that in certain circumstances and for a small number of men having a PSA test may not be the best thing but he/she should explain why that is. If you are still concerned or would like to discuss it further then you can always ask to speak with another GP or health care professional.

What might PSA levels mean?

To some extent this depends on your age as there are normal ranges given for specific age groups. As a man gets older more PSA leaks out into the bloodstream so the higher his PSA level is likely to be. The doctor will take this into account when looking at your results.

If the PSA level is not raised

The risk of cancer is low. However, another PSA test might be done at a later date. This is to make sure that the first test did not miss any cancer in the prostate.

If the PSA level is raised

PSA can be raised for other reasons, so it may not mean prostate cancer. The GP will probably carry out more tests such as another PSA test/s and a Digital Rectal Examination (DRE).

The GP may also refer you to a specialist in hospital called a Urologist to have more tests done such as a prostate biopsy.

PSA test or not - making the decision that suits me

The right decision is different for everyone. Think about what the benefits might be for you but also the drawbacks of having the test done.

It is advisable to talk this over with your GP and it is always helpful to talk it over with your partner.

To help you make this decision there is a fuller leaflet on PSA testing available from Prostate Scotland.

Screening using the PSA test

Although the PSA test is the best test available at the moment to check for cancer in the prostate, PSA screening is currently not recommended in the UK. However, this will continue to be looked into.

Prostate problems

- There are a number of diseases which can affect the prostate. It is not always prostate cancer
- Prostate disease generally develops when a man is in his 50's and symptoms can affect his quality of life unnecessarily. 1 in 2 men over 50 may be affected by prostate disease
- Prostate cancer is now the most common cancer in men in Scotland
- 1 in 11 men in Scotland may develop prostate cancer
- Early detection, diagnosis and treatment are key to improving the rates of cure

To check out your symptoms, take the symptom self - test at www.prostatescotland.org.uk

For more information see our fuller leaflet on PSA tests or our website www.prostatescotland.org.uk

The information contained in this leaflet has been developed by Prostate Scotland and reviewed by its Advisory Group of doctors, nurses and patients. This leaflet is not intended to replace medical advice or seeing a doctor for specific illnesses or symptoms.

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