

Prostate cancer awareness and the importance of regular PSA tests.

Prostate cancer is now one of the main causes of death from cancer diseases, along with bowel, lung and breast cancer.

A simple blood test (known as the PSA test) can indicate whether you are likely to have prostate cancer.

Sadly, the PSA test is not yet part of routine screening, so you have to ask your GP. This might take a bit of persistence, depending on your GP practice. The PSA test can give false positives and false negatives in some cases. The PSA test may not be as consistently reliable as we would like, but it's the only test there is at the moment.

Having recently been through surgery for prostate cancer in my mid-60's, I encourage all men over 50 to get their PSA level tested regularly, especially if there is a family history of prostate cancer. It may just save your life.

Prostate cancer is treatable with a high probability of success and minimal impact on your lifespan if caught early, before the cancer cells have started to break through the capsule surrounding the prostate. In general, the earlier the diagnosis, the better the range and choices of treatment you will have, depending on your specific circumstances.

Roughly one in eight men will develop a form of prostate cancer that requires treatment. Your risk of having prostate cancer is significantly increased if you are of Afro-Caribbean background or if your male forebears had prostate cancer. Many older men are likely to have a slowly growing variety of prostate cancer, which will not develop to the stage that they need treatment, so they are likely to die with it, but not because of it.

Typical symptoms are changes in your ability to urinate, perhaps more slowly or more frequently, or with less warning of the need to do so. The prostate surrounds the urethra, so as the prostate enlarges, it affects the urine flow. Not all urinary problems are caused by prostate cancer, it could be a benign enlarged prostate. Like me, you may find that you have no obvious symptoms, other than a raised PSA level. By the time you develop symptoms, it may well be too late for successful treatment.

The PSA test measures the level of PSA (Prostate Specific Antigen) in your blood. Regular tests (typically annually or six-monthly, depending on your circumstances) show how it changes over time. If the level is higher than normal, or starting to increase significantly, then further investigation is likely to be required. Be aware that strenuous exercise, cycling and sex can cause a raised PSA level for a day or two, so it's best to take it easy for a couple of days prior to the PSA blood test. A normal level for a man between 60 and 70 is between 1 and 5. A significantly higher value requires prompt investigation.

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The NHS pathway for treatment of prostate cancer provides a relatively quick progress from the initial referral by the GP through the diagnostic process and then on to treatment.

If further investigation is needed, then an MRI scan will generally indicate if there are clusters of potential cancer cells within the prostate. The MRI scan usually involves the injection of a contrast enhancer part way through the scan. If the MRI scan results indicate a potential problem, then a biopsy is generally needed.

The biopsy will be either trans-rectal or trans-perineal. It is an intrusive and fairly unpleasant experience where biopsy samples are taken with a large hollow needle inserted into the target areas within the prostate. Between nine and twelve samples are taken from each side of the prostate. The needle is inserted under local or general anaesthetic by a surgeon using the MRI images and an ultrasound imaging device as a guide. The biopsy is necessary to obtain good information in order to assess the type and progress of the cancer cells within the prostate in order to plan treatment.

Neither the MRI scan or the biopsy can reach all of the prostate, so it is fairly common for a post-surgery biopsy of the removed prostate to show that prostate cancer had developed further than the initial diagnosis showed.

To obtain further information prior to treatment, a bone scan can show if the cancer cells have started to spread. The bone scan uses a short half-life radio isotope that is injected, then about three hours later a gamma ray detector is used to build a 3D image of your skeleton. Any "hot spots" in the images will show where there might be clusters of cancer cells.

Once the diagnosis has been confirmed and the form of prostate cancer assessed using a "Gleason score" and a "staging grade", treatment options are presented by discussion with the relevant specialist nurses and medical experts in the field (eg: surgeon, oncologist, etc.).

At this point, you as the patient are given the choice of treatments, based on your understanding of the options, the potential consequences and your anticipated lifestyle. This is where having people you can talk it through with is essential.

The NHS provides help and advice during diagnosis and treatment by specialist nurses and support works who have extensive experience of dealing with prostate cancer. The NHS also provide counselling for those affected by cancer. In Bristol this service from the psychology department includes courses on "mindfulness".

Most NHS hospitals also have "wellbeing centres" for cancer related diseases, which again can provide invaluable support and assistance. Southmead Hospital in Bristol has the NGS MacMillan wellbeing centre.

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Excellent information is available from the Prostate Cancer UK Charity who publish a well-written, informative and clear set of documents that you can download as PDF or obtain in printed format by contacting them. Prostate Cancer UK also have an excellent and invaluable help line staffed by experienced nurses who will happily spend as long as it takes to answer questions and discuss whatever is on your mind before and after treatment.

Invaluable support is provided by local support groups, such as Prospect in the Bristol area. They provide a safe place to discuss prostate cancer issues from both the patient's and the family's perspectives. The national association of prostate cancer support groups is Tackle Prostate, who also provide an excellent help line service, staffed by volunteers who themselves have been through diagnosis and treatment.

Hopefully you won't become a member of the club that no-one wants to join, but if you have to, do so early! Take the PSA test and find out, then it can be dealt with if necessary.

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