

The PSA test for prostate cancer

Is it Right for ME?



**Department of
Veterans Affairs**



THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO
HEALTH SCIENCES CENTER

NEW MEXICO
DEPARTMENT OF
HEALTH

This pamphlet is designed to help men age 50 and older who DON'T have prostate cancer decide whether they want to have a PSA test.

Should I have a PSA test?

There is not right or wrong answer to this question! **Not all doctors agree that men should have the PSA test done regularly.** Read this pamphlet for important information about why.

What is the PSA test?

PSA stands for the Prostate Specific Antigen—a protein made by the prostate gland. The PSA test is a blood test that measures the amount of PSA in your blood. It tells your health care provider about your prostate. It can help your health care provider find prostate cancer early. This is why it is sometimes called “the blood test for prostate cancer.”

So, why aren't all doctors recommending this test?

Because nobody knows whether finding prostate cancer early through the PSA test will help men live longer. **WHY?**

- Because the PSA test can only help men live longer if prostate cancer treatments help men live longer, **AND**
- We don't know yet whether prostate cancer treatments help men live longer.

So the decision about whether to have the PSA test is YOURS.

How do I decide if the PSA test is right for me?

There are three things you can do to help make this decision.

1. Understand the facts about:

- Differences between prostate cancer and other prostate problems
- What the PSA test can and cannot tell you
- Other decisions you may have to make if you have a PSA test

Read this pamphlet for more information on these things.

2. Get more information on prostate cancer and the PSA test from your health care provider.

3. Ask questions

- Write down any questions you have about the PSA test and bring them to your next appointment.
- Ask your health care provider if they think the PSA test is right for you.
- Ask your loved ones what they think about the test.
- Ask **YOURSELF** if you want to know if you have prostate cancer, even though this may not help you live longer. If you answer “yes” to this question, the PSA test **is** probably right for you. If you answer “no” to this question, the PSA test is probably **not** right for you.

And remember—IT’S YOUR DECISION

The difference between prostate cancer and other prostate problems

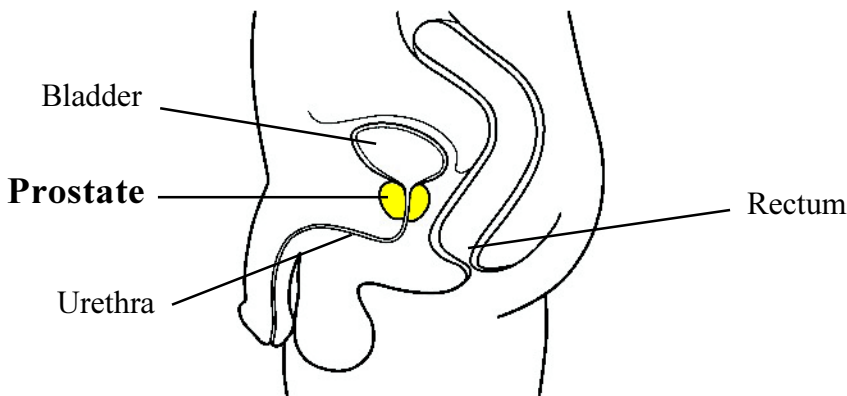
What exactly is prostate cancer?

In prostate cancer, the prostate cells grow abnormally. Prostate cancer cells can invade and destroy nearby organs. They can also spread to other parts of the body. **Prostate cancer usually does not cause any symptoms**, but some men who have prostate cancer experience:

- painful ejaculation (release of semen through the penis)
- frequent pain in the lower back, hips, or upper thighs
- weak, painful or slow urination
- blood in urine

You should tell your health care provider if you have any of these problems. **It does not necessarily mean you have prostate cancer if you have these problems.** Benign Prostatic Hypertrophy (BPH) and infections of the prostate can also cause some of these problems.

Diagram of the prostate gland



How serious is prostate cancer?

Prostate cancer **can** cause death. But most of the time, prostate cancer does not cause any problems for men. That is because prostate cancer usually grows very slowly. **Most men with prostate cancer die of something other than prostate cancer.** In fact, more men die of heart disease than die of prostate cancer.

How common is prostate cancer?

Prostate cancer is the most common cancer among men. Nearly one out of three men will get prostate cancer by the age of 80. The risk of getting prostate cancer increases with age. You are more likely to get prostate cancer if:

- you are African American
- your father or brother had prostate cancer

Does it mean I have prostate cancer if I have problems with urination?

Usually NOT. These problems are very common. Prostate cancer is NOT the most common cause of these problems. The most common cause of these problems is Benign Prostatic Hypertrophy (BPH).

Is Benign Prostatic Hypertrophy (BPH) the same as prostate cancer?

No. BPH is not cancer. It is non-cancerous enlargement of the prostate. It is very common but rarely life threatening. More than half of men over the age of 50 have this problem. In BPH, the prostate gets larger and pushes against the urethra and bladder. This can cause problems with urination such as feelings of not emptying the bladder, being unable to hold urine, frequent trips to the bathroom at night or having a weak urine stream. Treatment may be needed if the problems become severe or very bothersome.

What the PSA test can and cannot tell you

Can the PSA test tell me for certain whether I have prostate cancer?

No. It can only tell you if your PSA level is abnormal. An abnormal PSA level is one that is higher than the level found in other men. Prostate cancer can cause an abnormal PSA. But other things can also cause an abnormal PSA, including:

- Benign Prostatic Hypertrophy (BPH)
- Prostate infections

How accurate is the PSA test?

The PSA test can find cancer earlier than the Digital Rectal Exam. (This is the exam where a doctor inserts their finger through the rectum to check for lumps on the prostate.)

But the PSA test is not perfect:

- Most men with an abnormal PSA test result do not have prostate cancer.
- There is a small chance that you could have prostate cancer even if your PSA test result is normal.

Then how do I find out if I have prostate cancer?

If you have a higher than normal PSA test result, your health care provider may suggest that you have a prostate biopsy. A prostate biopsy is a procedure that involves removing a small piece of your prostate with a needle. It can be very uncomfortable. But it is needed to tell whether or not you have prostate cancer.

Other decisions you may need to make if you have a PSA test

What other decisions are there to make—it's just a blood test, right?

If you have an abnormal PSA test result, this may lead to a prostate Biopsy. If the biopsy shows you have prostate cancer, you will have to decide whether or not you want to be treated for prostate cancer. This can be a difficult decision for some men because:

- There is a very good chance that their prostate cancer will never cause them any problems. However, there is a small and frightening chance that it will cause death or severe disability.
- Prostate cancer treatments are not without risks—they can cause side effects such as problems with urination, sexual function, and bowel function.
- Nobody knows yet whether **any** prostate cancer treatment will help men live longer.
- Men who are over the age of 75 or who have serious medical conditions are unlikely to benefit from prostate cancer treatment.

To help you decide whether to have a PSA test, make sure you:

- understand the facts about prostate cancer and the PSA test
- get more information about anything that is unclear to you
- ask questions about the value of the PSA test for YOU

and remember—IT'S YOUR DECISION

Use this space to write down questions to discuss with your health care provider.

Remember—the decision about whether to have the PSA test is YOURS.

Developed as part of the NM Dept of Health/ Centers for Disease Prevention and Control funded Prostate Cancer Screening Education in Spanish (PCSES) Study, based on an English–Language booklet developed through the VA HSR&D funded PROstate CAncer Screening Education (PROCASE) Study.