

# PSA TEST FOR PROSTATE CANCERS

## Your Decision...

*This leaflet is designed to help you decide whether to have the PSA blood test for prostate cancers. You might have no 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 commonest 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's 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 70's or 80's. 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*

(Though most men with these symptoms *won't* have prostate cancer; they're more likely to be caused by other prostate problems).

### So what is the PSA test?

It's 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.

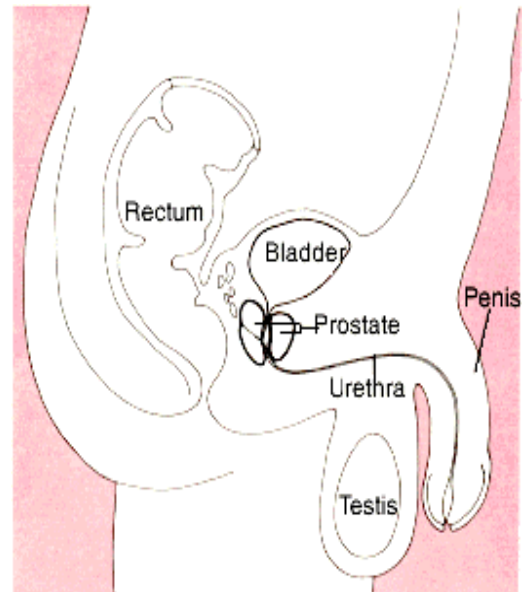
### How good a test is it?

The *PSA* test is not a specific test for prostate cancer. So 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's 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:

1. **PSA not raised**.....Highly unlikely to have cancer. No further action.
2. **PSA slightly raised**.....Probably not cancer, but might need to repeat *PSA* test
3. **PSA definitely raised**.....Probably need a *biopsy* to find out if it really is cancer



This picture shows the prostate and nearby organs.

## What is a biopsy?

If your PSA is definitely raised, you'll probably need to have a *biopsy* of your prostate. Doctors take a sample of the prostate so that they can look for prostate cancer cells under a microscope. It's done using an ultrasound scan and a probe, which is passed through the rectum (back passage). It can be uncomfortable (though you won't need a general anaesthetic) and there are sometimes complications such as bleeding in the urine, or infection of the prostate or blood. *It's important to realise that even if the biopsy doesn't find cancer cells, that doesn't completely rule out cancer. So 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. But doctors don't all agree on the best way to treat early prostate cancer, and there's no proof that treating early cancers helps men live any longer. There are four main options if you have got early prostate cancer, and they all carry some risks:

### **Radical Prostatectomy (an operation to remove the whole prostate gland)**

**Risks:** (estimated) For every 1000 men: 5 may die, up to 200 are left with leaking urine, between 200 and 800 develop erection problems

### **Radiotherapy (high energy rays used to kill cancer cells)**

**Risks:** For every 1000 men: up to 300 have bleeding or discomfort in the rectum, about 500 develop erection problems.

### **Brachytherapy (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.

### **"Watchful Waiting" (regular check-ups – treat only if cancer is growing)**

**Risks:** Worry of missing a growing cancer

## **SO 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, uncle, brother)
- 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 live longer
- The main treatments for early prostate cancer do carry risks

For further information, please read the patient information leaflet entitled Know more - in-depth summary