



FACT SHEET - PROSTATE CANCER IN AUSTRALIA

Facts and figures*

- prostate cancer is the most common form of cancer in Australian (and Tasmanian) men after non-melanoma skin cancer
- a total of 10,232 new cases of prostate cancer were diagnosed in Australia in 1999 and 273 new cases in Tasmania in 2000 (the latest years for which statistics are available)
- after lung cancer, prostate cancer causes more deaths among Australian men than any other kind of cancer
- a total of 2,512 Australian men died from prostate cancer in 1999 (71 in Tasmania in 2000)
- one in 11 Australian men will develop prostate cancer by the age of 75
- prostate cancer is rare before the age of 45
- almost 90% of prostate cancers occur in men aged 60 years and over, and 97% of deaths from prostate cancer occur in men aged 60 years or over
- after diagnosis, a majority of men survive for 10 years or more

What is the prostate?

The prostate is a small gland about the size of a walnut found only in men, sitting just below the bladder and surrounding the urethra (the tube by which urine passes from the bladder to the penis).

It is common for the prostate gland to get larger as men grow older. This enlargement is known as benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH) or benign enlargement of the prostate, and is not cancer.

What is prostate cancer?

Prostate cancer is a malignant tumour of the prostate gland. Very early prostate cancers are contained within the prostate gland and are called localised cancers. These early cancers often do not produce symptoms, may not progress to more advanced cancer and may not require treatment.

Some prostate cancers grow and may invade the tissues around the prostate gland (invasive prostate cancer). Cancer which develops in the prostate may spread via the lymphatic system to other parts of the body, such as the bones and lungs.

What causes prostate cancer?

The cause of prostate cancer is not known. Getting older is the most significant risk factor in its development. Men with a family history of prostate cancer are at higher risk of getting the disease.

Researchers are currently investigating additional factors such as physical activity and diet to determine if any of these have a role in the development of prostate cancer.

* Statistics from *The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Australasian Association of Cancer Registries publication Cancer in Australia 1999 (latest national statistics available)*.

What are the symptoms?

Early prostate cancer usually does not have symptoms. Symptoms which may occur later are indistinguishable from those of the more common, non-cancerous condition benign prostate enlargement, which is normally treatable. They include:

- frequent need to pass urine, especially at night
- difficulty starting urine flow
- slow, interrupted flow with dribbling afterwards
- blood in the urine
- pain during urination

Men with any of these symptoms should see their doctor.

It's important to note that prostate cancer can spread without these symptoms occurring. If this happens, the first symptoms may be pain in the bones such as lower back, pelvis or upper thighs.

Testing for prostate cancer

The most common tests for prostate cancer are the PSA blood test, rectal examination, and biopsy. A rectal examination is often done in conjunction with a PSA test.

PSA stands for prostate specific antigen. This is a protein produced by normal prostate cells, and is detected using a blood test. When cancer is present the level of PSA rises, and so this can be used as an indicator of prostate cancer.

The PSA test does not tell you with complete certainty that you do or do not have prostate cancer. Only one in three men with a higher than expected result are found to have prostate cancer. However it can be useful, because it guides the decision about whether you should go on to have further tests.

A biopsy is the only definitive way of telling whether you have prostate cancer.

Unfortunately, there is not yet a test available that is very good at differentiating between aggressive cancers and those which could be left alone. That's why it's important for men who are thinking about being tested to be fully aware of the pros and cons of testing, and to make a decision they are comfortable with on that basis.

Treatment of prostate cancer

If prostate cancer is detected and treated before it extends beyond the prostate, it can be cured. If prostate cancer is detected after it has extended beyond the prostate area, it can be slowed down by hormonal treatments.

Current treatments for prostate cancer include surgery, radiation therapy and 'watchful waiting'. Both surgery and radiation therapy have possible side effects including bowel injury, incontinence and impotence.

It is not always easy to know whether a cancer is confined to the prostate, and thus whether it is curable or not. Because cancers grow at different rates, it is also difficult to determine which of the early cancers pose a threat and thus whether treatment of early disease is necessary.

Further information about prostate cancer is available from the Lions Australian Prostate Cancer website: www.prostatehealth.org.au