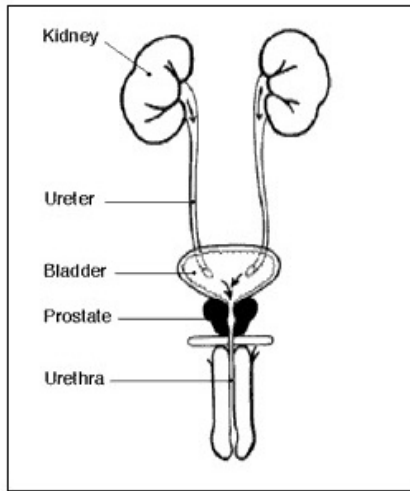


Should you get a PSA test? A Patient-Doctor decision.

This Web site discusses the Prostate Specific Antigen test, or 'PSA.' The PSA is a blood test to help detect prostate cancer. PSA testing is controversial.

This Web site will give you information to help you and your doctor make a decision about whether a PSA test is right for you. It is not meant to replace a visit to your doctor. The site will take about 10 minutes to read.



Where is the prostate located?

The prostate is found only in men. It is about the size of a walnut and located in front of the rectum, behind the penis, and under the bladder.

What does the prostate do?

The prostate produces seminal fluid, which protects and feeds sperm.

Prostate Cancer

After skin cancer, prostate cancer is the most common cancer in men. Prostate cancer is the second leading cause of cancer-related deaths for men. According to the National Cancer Institute, between 27% and 37% of men between 55 to 74 years of age have prostate cancer.¹ African-American men and men with a family history of prostate cancer have a higher chance of getting prostate cancer.

Prostate cancer is different from many cancers because it often grows very slowly. In 2007, only 27,050 Americans died from prostate cancer, compared to 218,890 men diagnosed with the disease. Many men with prostate cancer will never know they have it unless they get tested. In these cases, symptoms or problems are more likely to result from testing and treatment than from the cancer itself.

The PSA

All men have PSA inside their prostate and some in their blood. A value of less than 4 is normal. Higher values can be caused by prostate cancer. A high PSA can also be caused by conditions other than cancer like an enlarged prostate, inflammation of the prostate, infection of the prostate, or older age. Most of the time, an elevated PSA is due to other causes and not due to cancer.

Should I get a PSA test?

One use of the PSA test is to screen for prostate cancer. Screening means to look for cancer early, before any symptoms are present. If prostate cancer has spread outside the prostate by the time it is diagnosed, treatment is less likely to cure the cancer. The PSA test may allow doctors to find the cancer early when treatment might work better. This may prevent the cancer from harming your health.

To date, it is not certain that detecting prostate cancer early is helpful. As mentioned, the majority of prostate cancers will not cause health problems and therefore do not need treatment. For cancers that are going to cause health problems, it is unclear whether the problems are made better by beginning treatment early.

Treatment for prostate cancer can harm your health by causing sexual, urinary and bowel problems. If the cancer did not need treatment, the side effects of treatment may be worse than having the cancer. Conversely, if the cancer does do better with treatment, then the harms of treatment may be worthwhile.

The difficulty is that doctors cannot identify for certain which cancers will spread from those that will never cause health problems.

If I get a PSA test, what happens next?

There are 4 possible outcomes to a PSA test: