

Screening for Prostate Cancer

Information for Men and their Families

The Cancer Expert Working Group on Cancer Prevention and Screening concluded that there is so far insufficient scientific evidence to recommend whether screening for prostate cancer in men without any symptoms should or should not be done. Every screening test, together with the subsequent confirmatory tests and treatments, has associated potential risks which sometimes may outweigh the benefits. Men without any symptoms are thus encouraged to discuss with their own doctor about their individual circumstances and make informed decision on whether or not to go for prostate cancer screening. This leaflet (booklet) provides general information to you and your families on the subject.

What is the prostate?

The prostate is a sex gland in men that produces a thick fluid that forms part of the semen. It is located below the bladder and in front of the rectum. The urethra runs through the centre of the prostate.

What is prostate cancer?

Prostate cancer results from an abnormal growth of the cells in the prostate. The rate of growth of prostate cancer cells differs widely in different persons. Some prostate cancers grow slowly and may not affect the health of the person while some grow rapidly, spread to other parts of the body and cause death.

What are the common symptoms?

Early prostate cancer may have no symptom. Common symptoms of prostate cancer include:

- ◆ Difficulty or delay in urinating
- ◆ Slow or weak stream of urine
- ◆ Blood in urine
- ◆ Pain in the lower back, pelvis and hips

However, most of these symptoms are also found in men suffering from benign prostate hyperplasia (BPH), in which the prostate is enlarged due to non-cancerous growth within the gland. BPH is not cancer, and can be easily treated to relieve the symptoms.

Is prostate cancer common in Hong Kong?

There are about 1 000 newly registered cases of prostate cancer and 300 deaths due to prostate cancer in Hong Kong every year. It was the fourth commonest cancer among men in 2006, and about half of all prostate cancer occur in men aged 75 or above. The incidence rate of prostate cancer in Hong Kong has increased in recent years, but is still low when compared to Western countries.

What are the risk factors?

The causes for prostate cancer are not yet fully understood. However, we know that there are several major risk factors for prostate cancer, which include:

- ◆ Age: prostate cancer happens mostly in older men and is rarely found in men below the age of 50
- ◆ A family history of prostate cancer
- ◆ Physical inactivity

Results from studies on other risk factors are inconclusive.

What should I do if I have suspicious symptoms?

You should consult a doctor immediately. The doctor will perform a physical examination on you and may carry out some other investigations. These include digital rectal examination (DRE), blood tests, urine tests, ultrasound examination and other procedures to obtain tissue samples from the prostate for laboratory examination.

What tests will be done on me if I go for prostate cancer screening when I don't have any symptoms?

Two tests which are commonly used in screening are digital rectal examination (DRE) and total prostate-specific antigen test (PSA).

What is a Digital Rectal Examination?

The examination is performed by a doctor who will put a gloved finger into your back passage to feel the back portion of the prostate to determine whether the prostate is abnormal.

What is a PSA test?

The PSA test involves drawing a blood sample from you to measure the

level of PSA in your blood. PSA is produced by prostate glands and released into the blood. Several abnormal conditions of the prostate like benign prostatic hypertrophy (BPH), prostatitis (inflammation of the prostate) or prostate cancer could cause an increase in the blood PSA level.

How accurate are the screening tests?

The accuracy of the DRE is dependent on the skill and experience of the person who performs the test. Generally speaking,

- ◆ about 5 out of 6 men with abnormal DRE results do not have prostate cancer, and on the other hand
- ◆ about 1 out of 2 men with prostate cancer may not be detected by DRE.

Since an increase in PSA level could be caused by conditions other than prostate cancer,

- ◆ about 3 out of 4 men with a raised PSA level do not have prostate cancer, and on the other hand
- ◆ about 1 out of 4 men with prostate cancer may not have a raised PSA level.

This means that some men with abnormal DRE or PSA test results indeed do not have prostate cancer (false positives) but they will be subjected to unnecessary further investigations. The proportion of false positives among those with abnormal DRE or PSA test results will be even higher in younger men.

On the other hand, some men with normal test results may indeed have prostate cancer and they will be falsely reassured by the test and the cancer is missed (false negatives).

What further tests will be done to confirm a diagnosis of prostate cancer?

If the results of DRE and/or PSA test, which are not definitive diagnostic test, are abnormal, your doctor may refer you to a specialist for further investigations. Such investigations include a prostate ultrasound and removal of tissue samples (biopsy) from the prostate to determine whether cancer is present. Biopsy is invasive and there may be complications such as infection and bleeding.

What is the treatment?

Treatment for prostate cancer depends on the size of the tumour, whether the cancer has spread and the presence of any other medical conditions. It may include the following:

- ◆ Watchful waiting – involves monitoring the patient by performing the PSA test and DRE regularly, and treating it only when the prostate cancer shows signs of growing
- ◆ Surgery – involves an operation aiming to cure the cancer by removing the prostate gland
- ◆ Hormone therapy – aims to reduce the size of the prostate and keep prostate cancer cells from growing
- ◆ Radiotherapy – involves a course of radiation treatment and may prevent the spread of cancer

However, apart from watchful waiting, the treatment of prostate cancer may have side effects such as infection, erectile problem, bowel and bladder problems.

How can I help myself if I have prostate cancer?

You can face the disease positively in the following ways:

- ◆ Understand your illness and its treatment
- ◆ Talk to someone trustworthy about how you feel
- ◆ Cooperate with the health care professionals who are involved with your care
- ◆ Take part in support groups to boost the ability to self-care and for mutual support
- ◆ Maintain a healthy diet
- ◆ Exercise regularly under medical supervision
- ◆ Avoid stress, learn relaxation techniques and do things that you can enjoy

So, should I take the prostate cancer screening test when I don't have any symptoms?

Prostate cancer is not always an aggressive disease and its 5-year survival is high. Some are slow growing and many men with prostate cancer do not die from it. Treatment is not necessary in this group of men and could cause temporary or long-lasting side effects.

Therefore, before deciding for yourself whether or not to have prostate cancer screening test, discuss with your family doctor about its pros and cons. However, if any of your family members has suffered from prostate cancer, ask your doctor for any necessary screening.

Potential benefits of having prostate cancer screening

- ◆ A normal result may be reassuring
- ◆ It may detect cancer early
- ◆ Successful treatment may prevent more advanced cancer

Potential risks of having prostate cancer screening

- ◆ It may miss cancer even when it is present and cause false reassurance
- ◆ It may cause false alarm, unnecessary anxiety and potentially risky investigations when there is no cancer
- ◆ It may find cancers which are slow-growing and may not cause any symptoms or shorten life even if left undetected, and treating them may not be better than not treating them
- ◆ Subsequent investigations following screening test and treatment may have side effects such as infection, erectile dysfunction, and bowel and bladder problems.

Hotline

Cancer Hotline

"Cancer Comrades" Cancer Hotline

Opening : 8 pm to 10 pm

Phone: 2893 2122 / 2987 8933

CancerLink Hotline, Hong Kong Cancer Fund

Opening: 9 am to 10 pm on Monday to Friday; 9 am to 6 pm on Saturday

Phone: 3656 0800

Support Group

Hong Kong Anti-cancer Society

Phone: 2814 1232

CancerLink Support Centre Central, Hong Kong Cancer Fund

(includes English-speaking cancer patient support group)

Phone: 3667 3000

CancerLink Support Centre Wong Tai Sin, Hong Kong Cancer Fund
Phone: 3656 0700

You can get more information on men's health or related activities, or obtain promotion pamphlets and brochures related to men's health by the following ways:

Men's Health Programme, Department of Health

Website: <http://www.hkmenshealth.com>

Fax: 2575 4110

Email: menshealth@dh.gov.hk

Central Health Education Unit, Department of Health

Telephone no. for booking of health education materials: 2572 1476

Address: 7/F, Southorn Centre, 130 Hennessy Road, Wanchai, HK
13/F, Tsuen Wan Government Office, 38 Sai Lau Kok Road,
Tsuen Wan

Health Education Hotline of the Department of Health: 2833 0111