

Prostate cancer is the most common type of cancer diagnosed in American men (excluding skin cancer). Approximately one out of every six American men will develop prostate cancer in his lifetime. Prostate cancer is the third leading cause of cancer death in men, exceeded only by lung and colorectal cancer.

What is prostate cancer?

Most cancers are named after the part of the body where the disease first develops. Prostate cancer starts in the prostate gland, a walnut-sized sex gland. Only men get prostate cancer.

In the early stages of prostate cancer, the disease stays localized (in the gland) and does not endanger life. Without treatment, however, the cancer can spread to other tissues and eventually cause death. Most of the time, prostate cancer grows very slowly. But sometimes it can grow quickly and spread to other parts of the body. This is more common in younger men.

What causes prostate cancer?

The causes of prostate cancer are not yet known. There may be a certain genetic link that causes some men to develop the disease. Having certain genes, the basic units of heredity, in a family can result in a higher risk of getting prostate cancer.

It is known that certain risk factors are linked to prostate cancer. (A risk factor is something that increases a person's chance of getting a disease.) Some risk factors, such as smoking, can be controlled. Others, like a person's age or race, cannot be changed. While all men are at risk for prostate cancer, the following factors can increase the chances of developing the disease.

- Age. The chance of developing prostate cancer increases greatly after age 50. About 70 percent of all prostate cancers are diagnosed in men older than 65 years of age.
- Race. Prostate cancer is more common among African-American men than it is among white American men.
- Diet. Several studies suggest that men who eat a lot of fat in their diet have a greater chance of developing prostate cancer.
- Family. Men with close family members who have had prostate cancer are at higher risk.

It is important to remember that while these factors may increase a person's risk of developing the disease, they do not **cause** prostate cancer. Many men with these risk factors never develop prostate cancer; other men with this disease have no known risk factors.

How is prostate cancer diagnosed?

Screening procedures can detect prostate cancer in its earliest stages. Most cases of early prostate cancer cause no symptoms and are detected only by a screening examination. The best way to

find prostate cancer is to have a prostate-specific antigen (PSA) blood test and a digital rectal exam (DRE) performed.

Some prostate cancers may be detected during evaluation of symptoms such as a slow, interrupted or weakened urinary stream or the need to urinate more often. Symptoms of advanced prostate cancer include impotence, blood in the urine, swollen lymph nodes in the groin area and pain in the pelvis, spine, hips or ribs. These symptoms can be present with other diseases, however.

If your physician suspects prostate cancer after doing a DRE or if your PSA level was high, the next step would be to do a sonogram (ultrasound) and perhaps a biopsy. A biopsy is the only way to know for sure if you have prostate cancer. If prostate cancer is diagnosed, your physician may suggest more tests to find out the extent of the cancer and to plan treatment.

All men 50 years of age and older should ask their physicians about having the PSA test and a DRE every year. African Americans and men with close family members who have had prostate cancer should talk to their physicians and discuss the risks and benefits of early detection when they are 40 years old.

Can prostate cancer be prevented?

So little is known about exactly what causes prostate cancer, it is not possible to make recommendations about preventing the disease. Many factors influencing a man's prostate cancer risk (e.g., age, race, and family history of the disease) are beyond his control.

One important risk factor that can be changed is diet. A low-fat diet is associated with a reduced risk of prostate cancer. The American Cancer Society recommends limiting intake of high-fat foods from animal sources and choosing most foods from plant sources. Eat five or more servings of fruits and vegetables each day. Bread, cereals, grain products, rice, pasta and beans also are recommended. An overall healthful approach to eating also helps to lower the risk for other types of cancer.

The best protection against prostate cancer is to have regular medical checkups that include a thorough prostate exam. Regular checkups are important for all men.