



Hospital of St. John & St. Elizabeth

Health Screening Department Important Information

The Prostate Gland and Screening for Prostate Cancer

Information for men considering or asking for PSA tests.....

If you are a man over 50 years of age it is possible for you to have a blood test called a “PSA level” during your health screen.

This information is to help you make an informed decision.

Please read this information sheet carefully to help you to decide.

The Health Screening Doctor will discuss this matter with you during your consultation.

General Information.....

Where is my prostate and what does it do?

- It is a gland about the size of a chestnut that sits under the bladder and is wrapped around the urethra, the tube leading out from the bladder to the penis.
- Its main purpose is to add a special fluid to sperm before this leaves the body during ejaculation.

What is PSA?

- Prostate Specific Antigen is a chemical made by the prostate gland and normally it mixes with semen before ejaculation and its job is to make the semen more liquid.
- Some PSA we know seeps into the blood stream and this level can be measured on a blood test.

The Test Result.....

What if the test result is normal?

- This means that you probably do not have prostate cancer and most men feel reassured by a normal result.
- However the PSA is not totally accurate as a small number of men with prostate cancer have not shown a higher level of PSA.

What if the test result is high?

The PSA can be raised for 3 main reasons.

- **Prostatitis** – This is an infection of the prostate gland.
- **Harmless enlargement of the prostate with age** (Benign Prostatic Hypertrophy) – This is the most common cause of a raised PSA. Probably 50% of all men who have a BPH over age 60 and 90% will suffer from it by age 85.

• Two thirds of men who have higher levels of PSA do NOT have prostate cancer.

- **Prostate Cancer** – Prostate cancer is extremely common and the vast majority of cases occur in men over 60. However only one quarter to a third of men who develop prostate cancer will actually die of it, most eventually die of something else. It is statistically the third commonest cause of cancer death amongst UK men after lung and colon cancer.

What Comes Next?.....

So how can I tell if a raised PSA means cancer or not?

- To be honest it is not that easy. Clinical examination by feeling the prostate gland with a finger in the rectum can give the doctor some information about the health of the prostate but it can be unreliable.
- Ultrasound screening can be useful. The doctor might also use ultrasound to help to take a needle biopsy of the prostate through the wall of the rectum. These samples are then examined under a microscope to see if they contain any cancer cells.
- If the ultrasound or biopsy tests confirm that there is a cancer, you and your doctor then face decisions about what to do about it.
- Sometimes it is wiser just to repeat the PSA in a few months to see if there is any change.

Surely if I had prostate cancer I'd want to know straight away, so I could start treatment as soon as possible?

- At the moment, if you have a PSA test and are found to have prostate cancer, nobody can tell you for certain whether treatment will mean you live longer or have a better quality of life.
- Unfortunately little good quality research has been carried out on prostate cancer screening and this is why doctors do not always agree.
- Common sense would suggest that treatment at an early stage would be the best option but we do not yet know if this is the case.

So what are the possible treatments?

There are 3 options for people with prostate cancer that has not spread to other parts of the body:

- An operation to remove the prostate.
- Radiotherapy treatment.
- Watchful waiting. Remember many tumours are slow growing and treatment may be worse than non-intervention.

So would I be better off knowing if I have got prostate cancer?

- You may feel this way.
- In view of the uncertainties associated with the PSA test, you may decide not to have it done.
- Others prefer to find out if they have a raised level even though this may lead to further tests and possibly difficult decisions.
- There is no right or wrong answer to this.

Do you suggest I have a PSA test?

- Normally if you had symptoms or signs of a possible problem or a strong family history of prostate cancer, the doctor might recommend that it is done. Otherwise it can be done if you specifically request it to the doctor.
- We have decided not to do it routinely until more information is available

If you are still not sure then our doctors will be happy to talk this through with you.