

Is Prostate Cancer Screening Right for You?



By Howard J. Williams, MD, FACS
AMP Chief Executive Officer
Board Certified Urologist

Prostate cancer should be taken very seriously. It is the second most common cancer, and the second leading cause of cancer death, in men. According to the American Urological Association (AUA), one in six men will be diagnosed with prostate cancer in his lifetime. In 2012, more than 240,000 men were diagnosed, with 28,000 dying of the disease.

Yet many men will never know they have the disease unless they get tested. And although most prostate cancer tumors grow very slowly and may not cause noticeable health problems, some forms of the disease grow rapidly and aggressively with a high likelihood of spreading, or “metastasizing.”

What Is a PSA Test?

To diagnose prostate cancer, doctors use a blood test to measure levels of prostate-specific antigen (PSA). Based on your PSA blood level and physical examination (a digital prostate exam), your doctor may recommend a consultation with a urologist to determine if a biopsy is needed. A biopsy is the only way to know for sure if a tumor is present.

It is important to know that a PSA test is used to check for other conditions. If you are having urinary symptoms, your doctor might use a PSA test to evaluate your overall prostate health. Urinary symptoms can be caused by a number of conditions, not just cancer.

Studies have shown that those at highest risk of prostate cancer are African-American men; men with a relative (father, brother, uncle, or son) who has been diagnosed with the disease—especially if it occurred at younger than 55; men with a family history of prostate cancer in multiple generations. In these cases, you should consult with your doctor about the benefits of prostate cancer screening.

A Targeted Approach

In May 2013, the AUA modified its recommendation about prostate cancer screening. Now, the AUA *does not recommend screening in men of all ages*; instead it asks healthcare providers to use a more targeted approach. The decision to test should be made after a doctor and his or her patient has had a conversation about the following guidelines:

- ✓ The greatest benefit of routine screening was found in men ages 55 to 69. Men outside this range who are worried about cancer should talk to their doctor about the risks and benefits of testing (see below).
- ✓ Men with risk factors (see above) should definitely discuss testing with their doctor.
- ✓ Routine screening of men younger than 40 is not recommended.
- ✓ There is insufficient evidence to recommend for or against screening in men ages 40 to 54.
- ✓ Routine screening is not recommended in men older than 70, and with less than a 10- to 15-year life expectancy, although some men older than 70, can benefit from testing.
- ✓ Our accompanying chart is based on the new AUA guidelines and is designed to help you and your doctor decide whether prostate cancer screening is right for you.

Risks & Benefits of PSA Testing

Let’s look at the pluses and minuses of PSA testing. For one, a normal PSA test will set your mind at ease if you are worried about prostate cancer. If a tumor is present, PSA testing may help to find it early, and early treatment is key to helping men avoid problems associated with cancer and living (and thriving) longer.

However, like all medical tests, a PSA test may indicate no cancer when a tumor is in fact present (a “false negative”) or it may indicate something is wrong when it isn’t, causing needless worry and even an unnecessary biopsy (a “false positive”).

Also, a high PSA test might appear worrisome, but the cancer might be a slow-growing one that would never cause problems, potentially leading to unnecessary treatments and the side effects that come with them.

The Bottom Line

The physicians and other healthcare providers at AMP Urology support the AUA’s newly released *Clinical Practice Guidelines on the Early Detection of Prostate Cancer*. Furthermore, AMP Urology encourages continued patient education about PSA testing and aggressively defends a man’s right to choose what potentially life-saving diagnostic tests are right for him.

These thoroughly researched and peer-reviewed guidelines simply narrow the age range in which informed decision-making around PSA screening should be shared with men who are at *average risk* for prostate cancer. Those at high risk are encouraged to discuss their individual cases with their physician.

Ultimately, AMP Urology wants all men to understand that a PSA test is simply a blood test, not a commitment to do other, more invasive tests, such as a biopsy, or to start treatment immediately, even if it indicates cancer might be present.

A PSA test is one piece of information that helps a patient, his family, and his doctor make the most informed healthcare decision about what to do in light of its results.

To read the new guidelines online, visit auanet.org/education/aua-guidelines.cfm.

AUA New Guidelines for Prostate Cancer Screening

