Allina Health

Prostate Cancer

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Prostate cancer is cancer of the prostate gland, located just below the bladder in the male genital tract. The prostate is a part of a man's reproductive system. It makes and stores seminal fluid, a milky fluid that nourishes sperm and is released to form part of semen.

Prostate cancer is the most common form of cancer in men and is second only to lung cancer as a cause of cancer deaths.

Risk Factors

The causes of prostate cancer are not well understood. However, studies show that the following risk factors can increase a man's risk of developing it:

- **age** — being older than age 55. The average age of patients at the time of diagnosis is 70.
- **family history** — having a father or brother with the disease
- **race** — being black. (Prostate cancer is less common in white, Asian and American Indian men.)
- **diet** — eating high fat foods may increase risk. (A diet high in fruits and vegetables may decrease the risk. Studies are in progress to learn if certain dietary supplements can reduce the risk.)

Symptoms

Early prostate cancer often does not have symptoms. For that reason, it is important for men to have regular checkups so that their doctors can detect it early when it is more easily treated.

Prostate cancer can cause any of these problems:

- a need to urinate often, especially at night
- difficulty starting urination or holding back urine
- inability to urinate
- weak or interrupted flow of urine
- painful or burning urination
- difficulty in having an erection
- painful ejaculation
- blood in urine or semen
- frequent pain or stiffness in the lower back, hips or upper thighs.

Any of these symptoms may be caused by cancer or by other, less serious health problems, such as benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH), which is an enlargement of the prostate. If you have any of these symptoms, it is important that you see a doctor right away.

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Diagnosis

Prostate cancer can be detected by either a digital rectal exam or by a blood test for prostate-specific antigen (PSA).

- digital rectal exam — The doctor inserts a gloved finger with lubricant on it into the rectum. He or she feels the prostate through the rectal wall to check for hard or lumpy areas.
- PSA test — A lab measures the level of PSA in a blood sample. The PSA level may rise in men who have prostate cancer, BPH or a prostate infection.

If a suspicious area is found, or if your PSA level is elevated, your doctor may perform more tests such as X-rays, ultrasound, and/or blood tests. The doctor may also choose to perform a biopsy, which is the removal of small pieces of tissue for lab tests.

Treatment

Your doctor will develop a treatment plan to fit your needs. Treatment depends on the stage of the disease and the grade of the tumor (which indicates how abnormal the cells look and how likely they are to grow or spread). The doctor will also take into account your age and general health.

Treatment for prostate cancer may involve watchful waiting, surgery, radiation therapy or hormonal therapy.

Watchful waiting may be suggested if the cancer is found early and appears to be slow growing or if you are elderly or have other serious medical problems.

Surgery is a common treatment for early-stage prostate cancer. The doctor may remove all or part of the prostate, depending on the extent of the cancer.

Radiation therapy uses high-energy X-rays to kill cancer cells. It can be used instead of surgery in early-stage prostate cancer or to destroy cancer cells that remain after surgery.

Hormonal therapy is used to treat prostate cancer that has spread. It prevents cancer cells from getting the male hormones they need to grow. It is sometimes used after surgery or radiation treatment to try to prevent cancer from returning.

The Long-term Outlook

Prostate cancer has a high survival rate when it is detected and treated in its early stages. Also, many studies are being done to discover new treatment methods. When research indicates that a new method has promise, patients are treated in clinical trials to determine the new treatment's effectiveness.

Information adapted from the National Cancer Institute of the National Institutes of Health.

can-ah-14188 (3/02)