

# PSA testing for prostate cancer

The PSA test is a blood test that can help suggest if you have prostate cancer. It measures the amount of a protein called prostate specific antigen (PSA). This protein is produced by both normal and cancerous prostate cells. A raised level of PSA may be a sign of cancer. But the test is not perfect. So, it's important to understand and think about the risks, as well as the benefits, before you decide whether to have PSA testing.

## About PSA testing

PSA is a protein that's produced by your prostate gland. If you have a prostate gland, it's normal to have a small amount of PSA in your blood. Your PSA level rises as you get older, and your prostate gets bigger.

If you have prostate cancer, this can raise the level of PSA in your blood. A PSA test can detect this. But it's important to bear in mind that a raised PSA level can be caused by something other than cancer. There are some much less serious causes of raised PSA.

These include:

- having an enlarged prostate (benign prostatic hyperplasia). This is a common condition in older men
- urinary infections
- inflammation or infection of the prostate gland
- having a urinary catheter (a tube from your bladder to drain urine)
- recent vigorous exercise
- recent ejaculation

It's also important to know that prostate cancer doesn't always raise PSA. Around one in seven men with prostate cancer will not have a raised PSA.

Prostate cancer doesn't always cause symptoms and it becomes more common as you get older. Although prostate cancer causes problems for some people, others live with it for many years without any major problems.

## Who can have a PSA test?

If you have symptoms, which may include:

- having to keep getting up at night to pee
- having to pee more often
- difficulty in starting to pee
- needing to pee more urgently
- not being able to pee when you really need to
- feeling that you haven't emptied your bladder fully
- dribbling after you pee
- blood in your pee

A PSA test may also be offered if you have other symptoms which your GP feels might be due to prostate cancer, such as problems getting an erection.

## If you have no symptoms (screening)

PSA testing isn't part of a national screening programme for prostate cancer. This is because we don't know if the benefits of the test outweigh the risks. Instead, you can decide for yourself whether to have your PSA level checked.

So even if you don't have symptoms, you can request a PSA test at your GP surgery. But it's important to think about the benefits and risks of having the test, and its limitations.

## **What are the benefits and risks of a PSA test?**

We summarise some of the main points here:

### **Benefits**

- If you have a normal result, it may help to reassure you.
- If you have a prostate cancer that could go on to cause problems, the PSA test can help to diagnose it at an early stage.
- Being diagnosed early means you can get treatment earlier when it will be most beneficial.
- PSA testing can be useful for monitoring you if you've been diagnosed with prostate cancer and are under surveillance or having treatment.

### **Risks**

- You may get a normal PSA result even if you do have cancer (a false negative). This can provide false reassurance. But these are often low grade (less harmful) cancers and may not all be ones that go on to cause problems.
- You may have a raised PSA result even if you don't have prostate cancer (a false positive). This can cause unnecessary anxiety. It may mean you end up going for unnecessary invasive tests which themselves can cause side-effects. You may be diagnosed with a very slow-growing cancer that would never have caused problems. So, you may end up having treatment for your cancer that isn't really necessary.
- Everyone will value these benefits and risks differently. Your decision about having the test will depend on your own feelings and preferences.

### **\*\*IMPORTANT, PLEASE READ BEFORE HAVING A PSA TEST\*\***

You should not have the PSA test if you:

- have an active urine infection
- have had a prostate biopsy within the last six weeks
- have had a rectal examination within the last week
- have done vigorous exercise within the last two days
- have ejaculated within the last two days
- If your sex life includes you having your prostate stimulated, or being the receptive partner in anal sex, try to avoid these for a week before your test. All these things can raise your PSA level and so may give an inaccurate result.