



Best Defense Against Prostate Cancer: Screening

by Tim Ditman
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It's one of the most common cancers in American men. But experts say prostate cancer is manageable when caught early.



Uwais Zaid, MD, a urologist at OSF HealthCare in Alton, Illinois, is marking the end of National Prostate Cancer Awareness Month by urging men to get screening appointments on their calendar at the right time. That's critical, he says, because some people who develop prostate cancer will not show symptoms.

"It is something we certainly do take seriously in urology," Dr. Zaid says.

What is the prostate?

The prostate is a male gland about the size and shape of a walnut. It surrounds the upper part of the urethra, or the tube that carries urine from the bladder. The prostate makes some of the fluid that's part of semen.

Risk factors

Dr. Zaid says the risk for prostate cancer increases with age.

Other risks: "African American men are at a higher risk," Dr. Zaid says. "Certain dietary things like too much red meat and greasy, fatty food. And certain type of exposures such as Agent Orange for some of our veterans."

And like most other ailments, a family history of prostate cancer should put you on higher alert.

Screening: how and when

Dr. Zaid says prostate cancer screening involves two simple tests. One is a blood test that measures the amount of a hormone produced by your prostate called prostate-specific antigen (PSA). An abnormally high reading might warrant further examination by your health care provider.

The other test is a digital rectal exam, where your provider will feel for lumps on the prostate.

Don't get that confused with a colonoscopy, the more invasive screening that looks for colon cancer, Dr. Zaid says.

"It doesn't require any special or horrible bowel prep," Dr. Zaid says of the prostate exam. "It's about a 20 second thing we do in the clinic that can save your life."

You should always see your health care provider anytime something seems off with your body. But the American Urological Association has guidelines for when to get a prostate cancer screening.

"For most men, we want them to start screening with an annual PSA at age 54 to 69," Dr. Zaid explains. "For certain men, you want to start earlier if you have a risk factor."

After age 69, Dr. Zaid says you should talk to your primary care provider about what screenings are right for you.

What should you not do?

Don't think this type of cancer is so common that you should just let it run its course. Dr. Zaid says there are aggressive types of prostate cancer that can be deadly.

Also, Dr. Zaid warns of herbal remedies for cancer in general. He says your best bet is to see a doctor.

Treatment

Dr. Zaid says treatment for prostate cancer depends, in part, on how much the cancer has spread.

If it's contained to the prostate gland, he says radiation (sending radiation waves to destroy the cancer cells) or surgery to partially or fully remove the gland are options.

"If the prostate cancer has escaped the prostate gland, there are a lot of treatment options," Dr. Zaid explains. "This is actually a very active area with all sorts of research and new medications."

Hormone therapy may be an option here, the doctor says.

"It's very manageable," Dr. Zaid says on treatment of the disease.

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