

PSA

PSA (Prostate Specific Antigen) is checked by a blood test.

- PSA levels normally increase as a man gets older.
- PSA is usually raised (but not always) in Prostate Cancer
- There are other causes for a raised PSA including infection, sexual and physical activity

Prostate Cancer

- Prostate cancer is common and increases with age
- Most prostate cancers are indolent (Slow growing and unlikely to harm you)

When to check PSA

We generally check PSA if a man is in the following groups

- Has urinary symptoms such as difficulty starting urination, poor flow of urine, dribbling afterwards or going to the toilet more than once at night. (If in doubt then mention it)
- Family History in a brother or father (screen after the age of 40yr)
- African Ethnicity.

Screening men without symptoms

There are currently no guidelines recommending routine screening for prostate cancer. This is because many doctors believe that screening men without symptoms does more harm than good. It is recommended that you consider the Pros and Cons of PSA screening prior to having the test. If we check the PSA (blood test) and it is raised we repeat the test 6 weeks later due to a high incidence of false positives. If it remains high you will be referred to an Urologist who will usually arrange a Biopsy of the Prostate. This is performed via the rectum with local anaesthetic.

There have been a number of studies looking at the benefits of screening using PSA. Most of these studies did not show any benefit with PSA screening. Only one study (ERSPC) showed a significant benefit with PSA. The study included men aged 50-74yr and 13 years of follow-up. This study is ongoing and results may change with time.

The findings of this study are summarised below

- 781 men need to be screened to prevent one death
- 27 men need to be diagnosed with prostate cancer to prevent one death

Side effects of screening and the treatment that it results in include

- 1 in 10 men will be diagnosed with prostate cancer
- 1 in 10 men will have a false positive blood result
- 3 per 1000 will have a serious medical event due to treatment
- 29 per 1000 will develop erectile dysfunction
- 18 per 1000 will develop urinary incontinence
- Less than 1 per thousand will die due to treatment

There are also side effects from having the Prostate biopsy.

- 64% of men report minor problems with pain and bleeding after biopsy

- 1 in 10 men get infection after biopsy
- 1 in 100 men are hospitalised following biopsy

Summary

- The test is unlikely to prevent you dying from prostate cancer over 10-15 years.
- Elevated PSA values are common and lead to tests that do harms
- PSA tests find many cancers that will never cause health problems
- Once we find a cancer it is difficult not to treat.
- Treatments have harms that can be serious.
- The benefits of testing is small according to current studies
- There is little benefit in screening prior to 45 yrs in men without symptoms
- There is little benefit in screening after 70-75 yrs as other health issues are more significant