



Prostate-specific antigen (PSA) testing when you have no symptoms

This information is for men aged over 50 who are having a Bupa Health Assessment, and have no symptoms of prostate cancer.

As you are now aged 50 years or older, your Bupa Health Assessment offers you the opportunity to have a screening test for prostate cancer. This involves a blood test that measures the level of a substance produced by your prostate gland called prostate-specific antigen (PSA).

At Bupa we recognise that people will rank the pros and cons of testing differently. The purpose of this information is to provide you with all the information you need to help you decide whether or not to have a PSA test.

About prostate-specific antigen

Prostate-specific antigen (PSA) is a protein made by the prostate gland and is found in your blood. About two out of 10 men over the age of 50 have a raised PSA level.

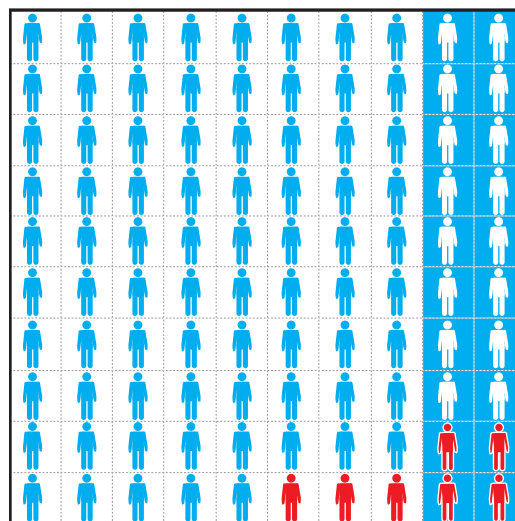
Sometimes a raised PSA level can be a sign of prostate cancer. However, more often it is caused by something less serious such as an inflamed prostate (prostatitis) or a condition that comes on with ageing that leads to enlargement of the prostate gland. This condition is called benign prostatic obstruction, also known as benign prostatic hyperplasia.

About the PSA test

It is important to understand that the PSA test isn't always reliable at showing whether or not you have prostate cancer. Out of 100 men aged 50 to 70 who don't have any symptoms for prostate cancer and undergo PSA testing:

- 80 will have a PSA level under 4ng/ml (traditionally considered 'normal') - of these, three men will turn out to have prostate cancer
- 20 will have a PSA level 4ng/ml or greater, but of these only four will turn out to have prostate cancer

This information is explained in the following diagram.



20 men will have a raised PSA test result. Of these, four will have prostate cancer and 16 won't.

80 men will have a normal PSA test result. Of these, three will actually have prostate cancer.

What happens if my PSA test result is 4ng/ml or greater?

If your PSA test result is 4ng/ml or greater, your doctor may recommend that you have a transrectal needle biopsy of your prostate gland. This test is to determine whether the increased level of PSA is caused by cancer or something else. The test involves passing an ultrasound probe into your rectum. Ultrasound uses sound waves to create an image of your prostate gland so needles can be passed through the wall of the rectum to take samples of cells from your prostate gland. You may find this uncomfortable or painful.

As with all procedures, there are risks associated with a transrectal needle biopsy. You will be given antibiotics at the time of the procedure but you may still develop an infection that needs additional treatment. You may need to have further tests to make sure that a cancer hasn't been missed.

How worthwhile is PSA testing?

Screening for prostate cancer using PSA testing can detect cancers in many men that may never cause any symptoms during their lifetime. Many men die with prostate cancer rather than from it, and finding out about it may cause unnecessary worry. At present it isn't possible to determine whether or not a cancer will spread.

Treatment for prostate cancer can lead to other problems. For example, two out of every 10 men who have surgery to remove their prostate gland develop some incontinence; many more will have erectile problems.

A considerable amount of research has been carried out to determine the value of prostate cancer screening. However, the initial results from two large studies provided contradictory evidence over whether or not PSA testing reduces deaths from prostate cancer.

The pros and cons of PSA testing

PSA testing isn't always reliable in detecting prostate cancer. Therefore, it's important that you think carefully about the following issues before making a decision about whether or not to have the test.

Pros

- The PSA test may indicate that you are at risk of prostate cancer before symptoms develop.
- A normal PSA result may provide reassurance that you do not have prostate cancer.
- If the treatment is successful at an early stage, you may not have the later symptoms such as bone pain.
- If a PSA test leads to you having successful treatment, you may be more likely to have no further problems from prostate cancer.

Cons

- A normal PSA test may still miss prostate cancer.
- You may have a transrectal needle biopsy for no reason. Out of 20 men with raised PSA levels only four will turn out to have prostate cancer after further tests.
- A high PSA test might reveal a slow-growing cancer that would not have caused problems during your lifetime.
- The main treatments for prostate cancer can have serious side-effects, including incontinence and erectile problems. Treatment may not be successful.

Making your choice about PSA testing

- Decide how important each of these pros and cons is to you. To help with this please rate each level on the scales out of five (where five is the most important) according to how you feel about the relative importance of a particular issue. Then add up each side to give an idea of your feelings for the pros and cons. This is a way of assessing your personal values.
- Consider any further questions you want to ask your doctor before deciding whether to have the PSA test.
- Get an indication of your overall 'leaning' for your screening choice before speaking to the doctor.

Further information

- www.dipex.org/psatesting
- www.prosdex.org.uk

