

Prostate Cancer

DESCRIPTION

Prostate cancer is a life-threatening tumor that develops in the prostate. The prostate is a gland in men within the pelvis at the base of the penis. It surrounds the bottom part of the bladder and urethra, the tube that carries urine from the bladder to the outside. The prostate produces a fluid that nourishes sperm and is ejaculated with semen, the fluid that carries sperm.

INCIDENCE

Prostate cancer is the most common cancer in men in the United States and is more prevalent in African-American men. It is the second most common cause of cancer death.

RISK FACTORS

The risk for prostate cancer increases with age, usually after age 50. It is not known how prostate cancer occurs. There may be a relationship with increased fat in the diet and prostate cancer. Under continuing investigation are the following possible risk factors; however, none of these factors have been definitely linked to prostate cancer:

- Previous vasectomy
- Cadmium exposure
- Exposure to high levels of male hormones
- Cigarette smoking.

SYMPTOMS

Prostate cancer often has no symptoms. When there are symptoms, they can be similar to the symptoms of noncancerous growth of the prostate (benign prostatic hypertrophy, or BPH, which can occur as men age). The symptoms of a tumor in the prostate are also often the same as the symptoms of an infection of the prostate or other blockage.

Possible symptoms are:

- The need to urinate frequently and with urgency
- Difficulty beginning a stream of urine
- Decreased force in the stream of urine
- Increased need to urinate at night
- Inability to urinate
- Bone pain or back pain if the cancer has spread.

DIAGNOSIS

Because prostate cancer may not have symptoms, the disease is usually found as part of a routine physical exam or an exam for some other health problem. A lab test is now available to help detect prostate cancer. It is a blood test for prostate specific antigen, or PSA; however, like other cancer screening tools, it is not perfect. For this reason there is some controversy about when PSA tests should be done. The test is most useful when done in conjunction with a physical exam and medical history.

When the rectal exam and/or the PSA result is abnormal, a transrectal ultrasound may be done to look at the prostate gland tissue. If the ultrasound scan is normal, your doctor will tell you how often you should be screened with an exam and PSA testing based on your age, family history or heritage. If the ultrasound shows one or more abnormal areas, those areas will be sampled (biopsied), usually with a hollow needle. After you are given anesthesia, a needle may be inserted through the urethra, the rectum or the skin between the rectum and the scrotum (the perineum). A sample of the abnormal area in the prostate is removed and examined under a microscope for cancer.

TREATMENT

Treatment depends on the size of the tumor, if the tumor has spread to other parts of your body and your overall physical condition. There are many treatment options.

- Surgical removal of the prostate, called radical prostatectomy, which often results in loss of ejaculation with orgasm and sometimes impotence (inability to have or keep an erection) and incontinence (trouble holding your urine)
- Radiation therapy, which can cause the urethra, rectum and anus to become inflamed and may also lead to chronic diarrhea
- Treatments to eliminate the stimulating effect of testosterone (male hormone) on the prostate cancer; for example, by removing the testicles or prescribing female hormones
- Chemotherapy.

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

Have regular checkups with your doctor. Rectal exams of the prostate can be embarrassing and slightly uncomfortable, but it is important for men to have one every year. The yearly rectal exam also screens for cancers of the colon and rectum.