

# Prostate Health



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Reviewed and Approved by the  
Senior Medical Advisory Board

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## What is the prostate?

The prostate is a gland that men have. It is under the bladder and in front of the rectum. The prostate surrounds the upper part of the **urethra** (you-REE-thrah). This tube empties urine from the bladder. A healthy prostate is about the size of a walnut.

## What does the prostate do?

The prostate is part of a man's sex organs. It supplies fluid that combines with sperm to make semen.

## What are prostate problems?

There are 3 prostate problems you should know about.

1. **Prostatitis** (PRAH-stuh-TY-tis). With this, the prostate gland is inflamed. The problem can be caused by an infection or other problem. This is the most common prostate problem in men under age 50.
2. **Enlarged prostate**. This is also called BPH. This stands for **benign** (be-NINE) **prostatic** (prah-STAT-ik) **hyperplasia** (HY-per-PLAY-sha). This is the most common prostate problem in men over age 50. BPH is not cancer. It just means the prostate keeps growing. This is due to normal aging.
3. **Prostate cancer**. This problem is the second most common type of cancer that men get. (Skin cancer is the first.) Prostate cancer is much less common than BPH. Most men with prostate cancer are older than age 65. It is rare in men under age 45.



## What causes prostate cancer?

The exact cause is not known. These things increase the risk for prostate cancer:

- Aging. This is the strongest risk factor. The chances increase sharply as a man gets older. About 80% of all cases occur in men over age 65.
- Family history. The risk is higher than average if your father or brother had it.
- Race. African American men are twice as likely to get prostate cancer as Caucasian American men.
- Growth of certain kinds of cells that are not normal.
- Diet. The risk may be higher for men who eat a diet high in animal fat or meat. The risk may be lower for men who eat a lot of fruits and vegetables.



## How do you know if you have a prostate problem?

**You may have one or more of these signs:**

- Strong urge to urinate. This occurs often. You may get up many times a night to pass urine.
- A hard time starting to pass urine.
- A weak urine stream that starts and stops.
- A small amount of urine is passed each time you go.
- It feels like you still have to go, even when you just finished passing urine.
- Urine leaks or dribbles.

**You may have one or more these problems:**

- Pain and burning when you pass urine.
- Pain and burning when you have an erection or pass semen. Problems having an erection.
- Pain in your lower back.
- Pain between your scrotum and anus.
- Blood in your urine.
- Fever and/or chills.
- You may not be able to pass urine at all.

**What should you do if you have any of these signs?**

If you can't pass urine at all, get medical help right away. For other signs, see your doctor. Your doctor can look for the cause of the problem and decide what should be done.

## What will the doctor do?

- Your doctor will do an exam and ask questions, such as, What symptoms do you have? How much do they bother you? Did your father or brother have prostate problems? Be ready to answer these questions before you see the doctor.
- Your doctor may ask for a sample of your urine. If this shows bacteria, an antibiotic is prescribed. This kills the germ that causes the problem. Some men keep getting this kind of infection. Why? They may have a defect in the prostate gland that allows bacteria to grow. Surgery can correct this problem.
- If no bacteria is found, your doctor looks for other problems that could cause your symptoms. He or she may order tests to screen for other prostate problems.



## What tests screen for prostate problems?

These tests help the doctor find out if the problem is an enlarged prostate or prostate cancer.

- A digital rectal exam. This is done in the doctor's office. The doctor puts a glove on and inserts a finger into the rectum. The doctor feels the part of the prostate that sits next to the rectum. This test helps the doctor find out the size of the prostate.
- A PSA blood test. A high PSA may be a sign of prostate cancer. It could be a sign of BPH or prostatitis, too. PSA blood tests are not a sure thing to detect prostate cancer.
- Imaging. Certain X-rays or other tests are done to get a picture of your prostate.
- Urine flow study. A special device you urinate into measures how fast your urine flows. A reduced flow could mean that you have BPH.
- Your doctor may do other tests, as needed, to check for prostate cancer.



## How is BPH treated?

- Watchful waiting. If BPH symptoms don't bother you too much, you and your doctor may choose to do these things:
  - “Watch” to see if symptoms get worse. “Watch” for other problems, too. While you do this, see your doctor about once a year. Tell your doctor what symptoms you have. Follow your doctor's advice for tests and exams to check for problems.
  - “Wait” to take medicine and/or have other treatments when you choose to.
- Medicines. These help keep the prostate from blocking the opening of the bladder.
  - One type of pill relaxes muscles in the prostate.
  - Another kind shrinks the prostate.
- Procedures to remove parts of the prostate. There are many types. Ask your doctor which one(s) best meet your needs. Find out about their pros and cons, too.



## How is prostate cancer treated?

Treatment depends on the man's age and health. It also depends on how slow the cancer is expected to grow or if it has spread beyond the prostate. Treatment includes:

- Watchful waiting. This means getting no treatment, but having tests at certain times to check for changes that may need treatment.

- Surgery. There are many types. Ask your doctor which one(s) best meet your needs.



- Hormone medicines. Some are pills. Some are given in shots. These stop or block a male hormone that allows cancer cells to grow.

- Radiation treatments.

### What can you do on your own to treat prostate problems?

- Follow your doctor’s advice to treat the problem you have.
- Take medicines as advised.
- Read labels on medicines you can buy at drug stores. Some can cause problems for men with prostate problems. Follow your doctor’s advice for these, too.
- Take warm baths.
- Don’t let your bladder get too full. Go to the bathroom as soon as you get the urge. Relax when you pass urine.
- Drink 8 or more glasses of water every day. Don’t drink liquids before you go to bed.
- Don’t smoke.
- Reduce stress.

Prostate problems are one health concern for men. Get regular checkups to screen for other problems, too. See the Tests & Exams Chart on the next panel.

## Tests & Exams Chart

**This does not take the place of your doctor’s advice.**

Test/Exam	Ages 20–29	Ages 30–49	Ages 50+
Dental Checkup	Every 6 to 12 months		
Physical Exam	Every 5 years	Every 2 to 4 years	Every 1 to 2 years
Blood Pressure	Every office visit; at least every 2 years		
Vision	Every 5 years	Every 2 to 4 years	Every 1 to 2 years age 65+
Cholesterol Test	Every 5 years or as advised by doctor (e.g., yearly if it is high)		
Testicular Self-Exam	Discuss with doctor		
Breast Self-Exam <sup>1</sup>	Discuss with doctor		
Digital Rectal Exam			Discuss with doctor age 45+
Prostate Specific Antigen (PSA)			Discuss with doctor age 45+
Glaucoma Screening <sup>2</sup>			Every 2 to 3 years
Colorectal Screening <sup>3</sup>			Discuss with doctor

1. It is rare for men to get breast cancer, but you should look for and report a breast lump or other change to your doctor.
2. Are you an African American? If so, you should start getting tested for glaucoma every 2 to 3 years between the ages of 40 and 50.
3. Screening tests include stool blood test, sigmoidoscopy, double contrast barium enema, and colonoscopy. Follow your doctor’s advice.