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The Benefits & Risks of Prostate Cancer Screening

What is prostate cancer screening?

Prostate cancer screening is a test that your doctor uses to look for prostate cancer before you have any symptoms. The two types of screening available are: 1) the digital rectal exam, 2) the prostate-specific antigen test, also known as PSA.

Should I be screened for prostate cancer?

The U.S. Preventive Services Taskforce and the American Academy of Family Physicians recommend against routine prostate cancer screening for men of all ages.

The American Urological Society leaves PSA screening decisions up to the patient's preference for men between the ages of 55 and 69, with the knowledge that it may prevent prostate cancer death for about one in every 1,000 men if screening occurs at 4 year intervals. The concern is that research studies indicate that more harm than good is done to the majority of men who undergo PSA screening.

What is the PSA test?

Prostate specific antigen is a substance that can be measured in the blood stream of all men. It tends to rise faster in patients with cancer of the prostate than in otherwise healthy men. The level can also increase due to inflammation or enlargement of the prostate that is not related to cancer.

What are the benefits of PSA testing?

The main goal of PSA testing is the early detection of prostate cancer. If a prostate cancer is detected and is a fast growing tumor, early detection may be helpful in obtaining a cure. However, most prostate cancers are not of this aggressive type.

What are the dangers of PSA testing?

Most of the cancers detected are slow growing and may never need treatment, but about 90% of men opt to have treatment. Surgery often leads to complications such as urinary incontinence and impotence. About 5 out of 1,000 men die as a complication of the surgery.

The PSA test results aren't always accurate. About 80% of elevated PSA tests are not due to cancer. These false positive tests often lead to prostate needle biopsies which do not always clarify if the patient has cancer or not.

How do I make a decision?

Stay up to date with the latest scientific information available and discuss your concerns with your doctor.

Sources: American Academy of Family Physicians, American Cancer Society, American Urological Association, US Preventive Services Task Force, FamilyDoctor.org