

# Should I have a PSA test?



Prostate Cancer  
Foundation of Australia

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## Should you have a PSA test?

Prostate cancer is the most common cancer in Australian men. Each year, over 25,000 men will be diagnosed with prostate cancer and around 3,700 will die from it.

The recommendations are that men over age 50, or over the age of 40 with a family history of prostate cancer, should talk to their doctor about testing for prostate cancer as part of their regular health check-ups.

It is important that you make an informed decision about testing based on the latest available evidence on the benefits and potential harms of testing and subsequent treatment for prostate cancer.

### **What is a PSA test?**

The prostate specific antigen (PSA) test is the blood test used to detect an increased risk of prostate cancer. Higher than normal levels indicate that you may have an issue with your prostate that requires further testing.

### **What is the issue?**

For a man with no symptoms or urinary problems, deciding to have a PSA test is complicated and the potential benefits and possible harms of PSA testing need to be understood. If you are considering PSA testing, ask your doctor to explain the potential benefits and possible harms of testing before you make your decision.

### **What if you have symptoms?**

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PSA testing is recommended if you have symptoms that could indicate a problem with your prostate. These include:

- urinary symptoms including frequent urination at night, poor urine stream, dribbling at the end of passing urine, or slow to start the urine flow
- blood in the semen or urine – never ignore this symptom
- pain on urination or ejaculation
- back or pelvic pain.

## What are the potential benefits of PSA testing?

- PSA testing can reduce a man's risk of dying from prostate cancer.
- In a man with no symptoms, PSA testing can detect a potentially harmful cancer before it spreads.
- Early detection and treatment of a harmful cancer increases the chance it can be cured.
- If you are concerned about prostate cancer, regular PSA testing can put your mind at rest.

### **PSA is not a specific cancer screening test**

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An elevated PSA can be caused by several things including benign enlargement of the prostate (BPH), inflammation or infection, a low-grade harmless cancer or a higher-grade aggressive cancer that can spread.

**An elevated PSA result means that there may be a problem in the prostate. Further tests are needed to work out the cause of the problem.**

## What are the possible harms of PSA testing?

- You may get a false positive result where your PSA levels are high, but you don't have cancer. This and the extra testing required can cause worry, distress and physical side effects (if a biopsy is needed).
- PSA levels may not be elevated in some men who have cancer and the cancer may be missed. This is called a false negative.
- PSA testing sometimes detects prostate cancers that are not harmful and would never cause problems because they may grow very slowly or just stay the same. Finding these cancers through PSA testing is called over-diagnosis.
- Doctors cannot be sure which cancers will be harmless, even after further checks and examination. Therefore, either Active Surveillance or treatment is recommended. So, across all the men who have PSA testing, some end up having Active Surveillance or treatment they may not need.

### **What happens if you get a positive PSA result?**

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Additional testing is required and could involve further PSA tests, a digital rectal examination, a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan and/or a tissue biopsy.

A tissue biopsy taken from the prostate is the only way a definitive diagnosis of prostate cancer can be made. The procedure involves thin needles being inserted into the prostate to obtain a sample of tissue. The biopsy can have side effects of bleeding, bruising, temporary urinary and erectile problems and infection, depending on how the biopsy is done.

If the biopsy shows that there is cancer present, a medical specialist (such as a urologist or a radiation oncologist) will discuss treatment options with you. Some prostate cancers may not need treatment and can be safely monitored. This is called Active Surveillance. Other cancers will require treatment, which comes with the possibility of side effects. The side effects vary with the type of treatment, but can include urinary problems, erection and ejaculation problems, bowel problems and fatigue, depression or anxiety.

### **Consider your risks**

Whether to have a test depends on your age, general health, whether you have symptoms, your risk of having prostate cancer and your preferences.

You may like to consider PSA testing if:

- you are over 50
- you have symptoms such as difficulty urinating or blood in the urine or semen
- you are over 40 with a father, brother or son who has been diagnosed with prostate cancer, especially if they were diagnosed when they were young, or if you have a family history of other cancers e.g. breast or ovarian cancers.

## What are the recommendations?

If you have symptoms that suggest a problem with your prostate, an examination of the prostate and a PSA test are usually required to work out what is causing the symptoms.

If you do not have symptoms that could indicate a problem with your prostate, the current PSA testing guidelines recommend that:

- men should be offered the opportunity to discuss the benefits and harms of PSA testing before making the decision to be tested
- men at average risk of prostate cancer who decide to be tested should be offered PSA testing every 2 years from age 50 to 69
- the harms of PSA testing may outweigh the benefits for men aged 70 and older
- men with a family history of prostate cancer who decide to be tested should be offered PSA testing every 2 years from age 40 or 45 to 69 with the starting age depending on the strength of their family history
- a digital rectal examination is not recommended as a routine addition to PSA testing done by a GP but is an important test when you are referred to a urologist or other specialist.

## Help to make your decision

It is a good idea to start a conversation with your doctor about PSA testing when you are 50. But if you have symptoms or come from a family with a history of prostate cancer, it's best to talk to your doctor sooner, around 40.

Your doctor should fully explain your risk factors and the potential benefits and possible harms of testing before you make your decision. It is important to ask lots of questions, so you clearly understand what PSA testing involves and what happens next if your PSA result is normal or elevated.

### Thinking about PSA testing?

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PCFA provides detailed information to help you weigh up the benefits and risks of PSA testing before deciding if you want to be tested.

You can find it here [psatesting.org.au/info](https://psatesting.org.au/info)

## For more information and support you can:

**Contact us:** PCFA is here to help. Call us on **1800 22 00 99** or email us on **enquiries@pcfa.org.au**

**Find out more:** PCFA has a range of evidence-based sources for men with prostate cancer and their families. Visit: **pcfa.org.au**

**Prostate Cancer Counselling Service:** Call us on **1800 22 00 99** and talk to one of our Prostate Cancer Specialist Nurses about a referral to our free Prostate Cancer Counselling Service.

**Join a support group:** Support groups around the country bring together men and women affected by prostate cancer. To find a support group, visit: **pcfa.org.au/support/find-a-support-group**

### For more information on prostate cancer visit:

**Cancer Australia:** [www.canceraustralia.gov.au/affected-cancer/cancer-types/prostate-cancer](http://www.canceraustralia.gov.au/affected-cancer/cancer-types/prostate-cancer)

**Cancer Council Australia:** [cancer.org.au/about-cancer/types-of-cancer/prostate-cancer](http://cancer.org.au/about-cancer/types-of-cancer/prostate-cancer)

**Healthy Male Andrology Australia:** [healthymale.org.au/mens-health/prostate-cancer](http://healthymale.org.au/mens-health/prostate-cancer)

### For further support contact:

**MensLine Australia:** [mensline.org.au](http://mensline.org.au)

**Beyond Blue:** [beyondblue.org.au](http://beyondblue.org.au)

**Lifeline Australia:** [lifeline.org.au](http://lifeline.org.au)

### Prostate Cancer Foundation of Australia (PCFA)

We are Australia's leading community-based organisation for prostate cancer research, awareness, and support. As the nation's predominant charity fund for Australian-based prostate cancer research, we exist to protect the health of existing and future generations of men in Australia and to improve quality of life for Australian men and families impacted by prostate cancer.

Our vision is a future where no man dies of prostate cancer and Australian men and their families get the support they need.

For further information or to make a donation, please contact us on:  
**1800 22 00 99** (toll free) or visit: **pcfa.org.au**



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