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AMERICAN ACADEMY OF  
FAMILY PHYSICIANS

# The PSA blood test for prostate cancer

## When men need it—and when they don't

**F**or years, doctors have used a PSA blood test to screen men for prostate cancer.

The test measures a protein made by the prostate gland, called a prostate-specific antigen (PSA).

But the PSA test can do more harm than good. Here's why:

### **The test is often not needed.**

Most men with high PSAs don't have prostate cancer. Their high PSAs might be due to:

- An enlarged prostate gland.
- A prostate infection.
- Recent sexual activity.
- A recent, long bike ride.

Up to 25% of men with high PSAs may have prostate cancer, depending on age and PSA level. But most of these cancers do not cause problems. It is common for older men to have some cancer cells in their prostate glands.



These cancers are usually slow to grow. They are not likely to spread beyond the prostate. They usually don't cause symptoms, or death.

Studies show that routine PSA tests of 1,000 men ages 55 to 69 prevent one prostate cancer death. But the PSA also has risks.

## **There are risks to getting prostate cancer tests and treatments.**

If your PSA is not normal, you will probably have a biopsy. The doctor puts a needle through the wall of the rectum and into the prostate to take a few samples. Biopsies can be painful and cause bleeding. Men can get serious infections from biopsies, and they may need hospital care.

Surgery or radiation are the usual treatments for prostate cancer. They can do more harm than good. Treatment can cause serious complications, such as heart attacks, blood clots in the legs or lungs, or even death. In addition, 40 men out of 1,000 will become impotent or incontinent from treatment.

## **Screenings can lead to high costs.**

The cost for a PSA test is fairly low—about \$40.

If your result is abnormal, the costs start adding up. Your doctor will usually refer you to a urologist for a biopsy. Costs may include:

- A consultation fee (up to \$350).
- An ultrasound fee (about \$150).
- Additional professional fees (up to \$200).
- Biopsy fees (about \$500).

If the biopsy causes problems, there are more costs. You might also have hospital costs.

## **When is a PSA test needed?**

If you are age 50 to 74, you should discuss the PSA test with your doctor. Ask about the possible risks and benefits.

Men under 50 or over 75 rarely need a PSA test, unless they have a high risk for prostate cancer.

- You are more likely to get prostate cancer if you have a family history of prostate cancer, especially in a close relative such as a parent or sibling.
- Your risks are higher if your relative got prostate cancer before age 60 or died from it before age 75. These early cancers are more likely to grow faster.
- If you have these risks, you may want to ask your doctor about getting the PSA test before age 50.

This report is for you to use when talking with your healthcare provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

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