

The PSA (Prostate specific Antigen) is a simple blood test designed to detect prostate cancer early. Although it has been around for several decades, the benefits of having a PSA test done as part of a regular physical are very unclear and controversial. This is a brief summary of the situation to help you decide whether you want a PSA test or not.

The PSA by itself does NOT detect cancer. When it is elevated, it tells us that the likelihood of prostate cancer is increased. This usually leads to referral to a urologist who will need to do a biopsy of the prostate to determine if cancer is actually present. Then, if cancer is found, decisions will have to be made about the kind of treatment to receive and even whether or not to treat. so an elevated PSA simply begins a fairly involved process of evaluation.

The difficulties with the PSA as a screening test boil down to 3 concerns:

1. A normal value for the PSA does NOT guarantee that cancer is not present. About 15% of men with a normal PSA will have cancer.
2. An elevated PSA does NOT mean that cancer IS present. In fact, only 1 in 3 men with an elevated PSA will turn out to have cancer.
3. Even if prostate cancer is found, the evidence that early treatment saves lives is unclear. This is probably the most difficult part of the puzzle as it does not fit in with our experience with many other cancers.

There is little doubt that early detection of breast, colon, and cervical cancers save lives, thus the appeal of mammograms, colonoscopy, and Pap smears, respectively. However prostate cancer is unusual in that it can vary widely in severity and aggressiveness. In some men it grows and spreads rapidly, leading to death. In others, it remains quite inactive, and although present, does not cause any problems. What this means is that for men on either end of the spectrum, treatment of the cancer may be unnecessary, while for others it may be pointless, yet there are clearly those in the middle for whom early treatment results in a cure or extends life. Unfortunately there is not consistent way to tell which way any one individual's cancer will go.

Without a doubt, there are thousands of men living today in whom an elevated PSA led to a diagnosis of cancer and who are surviving after treatment of that cancer. Whether they would be surviving even if there had been no treatment is unknown. It is equally true that there are thousands of men whose elevated PSA led to treatment for cancer that has left them with erection problems and urinary leakage. Whether they would have died from their cancer without the treatment is unknown as well.

Although there is considerable controversy among professionals as to the value of the PSA, most would have it done on themselves or family members.

If you want to read more about this, type "should I have a PSA test" into your web browser. You are more than welcome to talk to your doctor, and you can have the test drawn at the time of your physical or at another time.