

Detecting a health problem early is usually a good thing, provided you do the right things to correct it. This has often been the case with most cancers. Approximately 17% of men will develop prostate cancer each year. With such a high percentage it would seem reasonable to try to detect the disease early and begin treatment as soon as possible.

For years, the primary test used to screen for prostate cancer has been a PSA test which is a blood test that looks for a specific substance in the blood. Unfortunately, an elevated PSA can mean a number of things other than cancer. It can be high during a prostate infection, prostate inflammation or simply an enlarged prostate. In fact most men with elevated PSA levels do not have cancer.

The old method of a digital (manual) exam of the prostate also is far from perfect. About 80% of patients who are found to have abnormal prostates during this exam do not have cancer.

Many experts now agree that even if cancer is confirmed, treatment is not always necessary. Although 17% of men will develop prostate cancer, only 3% of those diagnosed will actually die from the disease. Prostate cancer is especially slow growing and most who develop it die from other conditions before they die from the cancer.

Since prostate cancer treatment can have its own significant complications, many experts believe that the treatment can be worse than the disease. As with many medical tests and procedures, recommendations vary from expert to expert. Some recommend PSA tests after age 40. Others say that anyone over 75 should not have the test and they don't make any recommendations for younger men due to the inadequate supporting research.

As always, talk to your doctor and do your own research before you decide what is right for you.