

September 21, 2005

Keeping Your Prostate Healthy

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Jeff didn't know exactly where his prostate was located or what its function was, but he spent a good bit of time worrying about its health.

Jeff's father was undergoing treatment for prostate cancer at the time he died of a heart attack. His best friend had his prostate removed recently after cancer was discovered through a PSA screening test and a biopsy.

Prostate cancer strikes one of six American males. It's the second most common cancer after skin cancer, and high-profile cases abound. Timothy Leary, Linus Pauling and Frank Zappa died of prostate cancer; Joe Torre, Colin Powell, Nelson Mandela, Rudolph Giuliani, Dusty Baker and Bob Dole are among the survivors.

As cancers go, prostate cancer is not the most deadly. In fact, 84 percent of patients are alive 10 years after diagnosis.

Nevertheless cancer is never to be taken lightly, and Bob Dole's ads for Viagra highlight the negative effects frequently associated with prostate cancer treatment. Jeff was determined to learn everything he could do to keep his own prostate healthy.

The prostate is a gland about the size and shape of a crab apple that produces part of the fluid that makes up semen and acts to propel semen through the urethra during ejaculation. It's located just below the bladder and can be easily reached through the rectum.

The digital rectal examination (DRE), a routine part of a male's physical examination after age 50, is one way of checking for abnormalities that could signal cancer. Digital rectal examinations are likely to miss early cancers, however, and the most effective screening tool today is a combination of DRE and the prostate specific antigen (PSA) blood test.

PSA or No?

Jeff's friend urged him to get a PSA test, and Jeff's doctor concurred. The decision is not as simple as it sounds, however. False positives are common with this test, and these can lead to costly, invasive

biopsies...not to mention anxiety.

Jeff's friend is happy that his cancer was detected before it had spread, and he feels reasonably secure now that his cancerous prostate has been removed through a prostatectomy. There are side effects frequently associated with prostatectomy, however, including erectile dysfunction and urinary incontinence. And at this time there is no conclusive evidence that PSA testing, despite the early detection, has resulted in a reduction of prostate cancer deaths.

Jeff's father, for example, apparently had a slow-growing tumor that developed over 15 to 20 years before finally causing distressing symptoms in late life, when he was also struggling with severe heart disease. Many individuals, on the other hand, have rapidly growing cancers that become life threatening or fatal within a short time of diagnosis.

Jeff's decision about PSA testing is a personal one he must make based on his lifestyle, personality and personal and family medical history. Whatever he decides, there are other things he can do to reduce his risk.

Doctors don't know what causes prostate cancer, but the incidence of microscopic prostate cancer is apparently widespread and similar in most countries of the world. The death rates vary widely, however, not only from one country to another but between different regions of the United States.

One factor that may affect the growth of prostate cancer is sunlight. Studies have generally found that men least likely to die of prostate cancer are those with fair skin living in a sunny climate. Mortality rates among white males, for example, are much lower in the sunny Southwest than in the overcast northeastern states. Blacks, who absorb less vitamin D through their skin, have a significantly higher rate of advanced prostate cancer, and Jamaicans have the highest mortality rate in the world.

Sunlight is a major source of vitamin D, and one laboratory study found that high concentrations of vitamin D alter the makeup of prostate cancer cells so they are less likely to spread. Just a half hour or so in the sun every day, along with some fortified milk, is probably sufficient to reduce your risk. It's not known whether vitamin D supplements provide the same benefit, but, as with most vitamins, megadoses can be toxic.

Prostate cancer risk is 70 percent higher in men who consume large quantities of alpha-linolenic acid (ALA), an omega-3 fatty acid found in meat, vegetable oils and other foods.

Another type of omega-3 fatty acid found in fish, however, apparently has a beneficial effect. Among 47,000 men in the Health Professionals Follow-Up Study, those who reported eating fish more than three times a week had a 44 percent lower risk of advanced prostate cancer over a 12-year period. Fish oil

supplements, according to this study, had no such positive effect.

Lycopene, abundant in cooked tomatoes, pink grapefruit and watermelon, is an antioxidant that has gained attention recently. One study found that older men with higher blood levels of lycopene had a 50 percent reduced risk of prostate cancer; another study found that men who ate two or more servings of tomato sauce a week had a 35 percent reduced risk of metastatic prostate cancer over a 12-year period.

Too Much of a Good Thing...

A man age 50 and over needs 1,200 milligrams of calcium a day to maintain strong bones...but not much more than that if he wants to protect his prostate. A high calcium intake lowers blood levels of vitamin D. In one study, men getting 1,500 milligrams or more a day of calcium had roughly double the risk of prostate cancer.

Studies have shown beneficial effects for Vitamin E, selenium and zinc, but, in nearly every case, those who benefited were deficient in these substances. In fact, prostate cancer risk doubled in men getting more than 100 milligrams a day of zinc.

Prostate cancer rarely produces noticeable symptoms until it is too late. The urinary symptoms that many middle-aged and older men experience—difficulty urinating, dribbling, a weak stream and the need to get up several times during the night to urinate—can signal cancer but are most likely caused by non-cancerous enlargement of the gland known as benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH). While BPH may require medication or even surgical treatment, it's not cancer and neither increases nor decreases a person's risk of getting cancer.

Unfortunately, when it comes to prevention, scientists still have more questions than answers. The answer for Jeff is to make sensible lifestyle choices based on overall health as well as prostate cancer prevention.

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