

September is prostate cancer awareness month
by Mike DeCinti

As I have often done in the past, for this article I'd like to point out a national health observance for the month of September. Many of you already know that each month the National Health Information Center tries to bring the public awareness concerning a specific health-related issue to the forefront, in hopes that it will get people talking about it and hopefully spread needed information.

Some of these observances get more attention than others, such as October's Breast Cancer Awareness Month or February's American Heart Month, but nonetheless they are all very important in raising our health and wellness conscience.

And although there are several for the month of September, I thought one of the most important might be Prostate Cancer Awareness. So whether you are a male over the age of 35 or know one, I hope you'll find this information to extremely useful.

First, the basics. Your prostate is a gland found just below the bladder and in front of the rectum. It wraps around a tube called the urethra, which carries fluids out of the penis. The prostate gland starts out about the size of an almond, until males reach puberty when it doubles in size. At about 45, the prostate often starts growing again and for some men will continue to grow. However, often times this growth is non-cancerous and known as BPH (benign prostatic hyperplasia.) You've probably seen the commercials on TV for the popular drugs Flomax and Avodart that help men with this problem. If this growth is cancerous, it often starts inside the prostate and may grow to involve the entire gland and then spread outside the gland to other parts of the body. Now the facts.

- 1 in every 6 men will get prostate cancer sometime in his life. Nearly 219,000 new cases are expected this year (more than breast cancer) and is the second-leading cause of male cancer-related death in the United States.
- African American men are at special risk for the disease, with the highest rate of prostate cancer in the world: 1 in 4 men. African American men are 2.5 times more likely to die from the disease.
- Obesity is a significant predictor of prostate cancer severity. Men with a body mass index over 32.5 have about 1/3 greater risk of dying from prostate cancer. Research shows high cholesterol levels are strongly associated with advanced prostate cancer.
- The chances of getting prostate cancer are 1 in 3 if you have just one close relative (father, brother) with the disease. The risk is 83% with two close relatives. With three, it's almost a certainty (97%).
- There are no noticeable symptoms of prostate cancer while it is still in the early stages. This is why screening is so critical. Every man age 50 or over should

resolve to be screened annually. African American men or those with a family history of the disease should start annual screening at 40.

- With the use of screening, about 9 out of 10 cases are now found early. Nearly 100% of men diagnosed with prostate cancer while it is still in the early stages are still alive 5 years from diagnosis. Of men diagnosed in the late stages of the disease, 33.4% survive 5 years.

It's important to know that screening doesn't show whether you have prostate cancer, only whether you need further testing. Your doctor may recommend a biopsy based on your screening results. Prostate cancer screening consists of two examinations, which are often done together to increase the accuracy of diagnosis.

1. A blood test that measures levels of Prostate Specific Antigen or PSA.
2. A physical exam of the prostate, the Digital Rectal Exam or DRE.

The PSA test is the best option we have for early detection. Mortality rates have dropped considerably since it became widely used. Annual screening should start at 50 for the general population. African American men or men with 1 or more risk factors should start annual screening at 40. Some men choose to take a single test at an even earlier age, to get a PSA level when prostate cancer is not present and establish a "baseline" level for future comparison.

The DRE may already be part of your annual physical. The doctor is looking for bumps or abnormalities on the surface of your prostate that might be tumor growth. Most men may be somewhat hesitant about this exam, but if we're going to encourage the women in our lives to get a mammogram, we need to set an example and get a DRE.

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