

Prostate-Specific Antigen (PSA)

The prostate is an internal organ that men have next to the urinary bladder. PSA is a substance made by the prostate which can be measured with a blood test. Some years ago, it began to be used for the early diagnosis of prostate cancer. However, it is not certain whether PSA measurement prevents death from cancer and it often has negative effects. In fact, it tends to increase with small changes in the prostate, it does not detect all cancers, it can result in unnecessary biopsies and it identifies cancers that would never have caused problems.

Nowadays the criteria have changed and PSA is not measured in all patients, but only in certain age groups who have specific symptoms.

Similarly, scientific societies recommend the patient to decide with his doctor whether to have his PSA analyzed once he has understood the risks and benefits involved in the test.

Who is affected by prostate cancer?

Prostate cancer is very common. In most cases it develops slowly, over more than 10 or 15 years, and often never causes any symptoms. Most of these cancers will not cause any discomfort, while others will cause symptoms and some may even result in the patient's death. Two out of every three patients diagnosed with prostate cancer would have remained free of symptoms and would never have known that they had it. Of the remaining third of the patients that experience symptoms and discomfort because of prostate cancer, over half would not die from cancer even if they did not receive any treatment.

What advantages are there to having a PSA test?

A PSA test helps diagnose prostate cancer when it is in the early stages, which increases the chances of following a less aggressive, effective treatment.

What drawbacks does PSA screening have?

PSA is not an exact test. It can have high levels when there is a cancer, but also in other situations. It also fluctuates with time and so sometimes it has to be repeated.

When PSA values are high, in addition to the anxiety that this can cause, it is necessary to carry out other tests like an ultrasound scan or an MIR scan and a biopsy. The biopsy causes pain and anxiety and can result in a fever, blood in the semen or urine or a urinary infection, and a general infection in every 250 biopsies carried out.

Once a prostate cancer is diagnosed, your Urologist can propose monitoring it without treatment, as many cancers do not grow or advance so slowly that it is preferable to postpone starting treatment so as to avoid side effects. In this case, some patients suffer from anxiety.

If the cancer is not advanced, you may be offered surgical or radiation therapy to try to cure it. The benefits of these treatments are not very clear and they often have serious side effects (urinary incontinence, impotence or other complications associated with major surgery). When a cancer is diagnosed it is not possible to know whether it will be one that develops or not, so they all have to be treated, including many that would never cause any problems.