Prostate cancer

The prostate gland in young men is the size of a walnut and surrounds the outlet at the base of the bladder. It makes the fluid in which sperm swim (semen). With age the prostate grows, with the rate of growth varying. This can lead to difficulty in passing urine. Some men develop prostate cancer, which is the third most common cancer in men (after lung and skin cancer) in the UK. If caught early, prostate cancer can be cured.

Symptoms
Symptoms are similar for simple enlargement of the prostate gland and cancer. They may include:

- difficulty in starting to pass urine, and a poor stream of urine
- passing urine more frequently than usual, especially at night
- blood in the urine or pain on passing urine (less common, but more usual in prostate cancer)
Prostate cancer

Gradual enlargement of the prostate occurs in all men as they get older and may cause symptoms of benign prostatic hyperplasia. This is not cancer and can be easily treated, usually by an operation to remove part of the prostate gland.

Cancer of the prostate takes years to develop and may not cause symptoms. If shown, the initial symptoms are usually related to passing urine. Advanced prostate cancer may spread to the bones, when it can cause pain in areas such as the back.

Who is at risk?
- Older men – prostate cancer is unusual in men under 50 and the rates increase sharply with age. More than half the cases occur in men over 75.
- Exposure to cadmium and X-rays increases the risk of prostate cancer. Farmers are the occupational group most likely to contract the disease.
- Men whose diets are low in fat and high in green vegetables are less likely to have prostate cancer.

Where to go for help
If you have difficulty in passing urine, or notice a change in the way you pass urine, you should go to your GP for an examination.

Diagnosis and treatment
- The GP may wish to examine your prostate gland by an internal examination. This is like inserting a suppository. The doctor puts a gloved index finger into the back passage and feels the prostate gland which lies just in front. The GP may also do a blood test.
- If the GP thinks that you have prostate trouble, he will refer you to a specialist surgeon (urologist) at the hospital.
- Body scans may be needed if cancer shows on a biopsy.
- Men who have trouble passing urine usually have part of the prostate removed. This allows the flow of urine from the bladder to be increased and provides biopsy tissue for examination under the microscope.
- Surgery or radiation treatment can eradicate the cancer.

The types of treatment you need should be discussed with you by a cancer team involving both a surgeon and a clinical oncologist (who provides radiotherapy) because surgery and radiotherapy are both treatment options.

What happens afterwards?
- Radical surgery to remove the prostate gland can affect your ability to have an erection and may cause incontinence (leakage of urine). This may also happen because the cancer has affected the normal control mechanism.
- Radiation treatment can avoid some of the problems of surgery, but it may have other side-effects such as inflammation of the rectum, causing frequent bowel actions.
- Hormone tablets can be a great help in relieving symptoms if the cancer has spread, particularly to the bones. But your ability to have an erection and ejaculate may be affected by these hormones.
- The ability to have children may be affected by all these treatments.

This factsheet is one of a series which give information on the following range of infections and diseases: bacterial vaginosis, chlamydia, cystitis, genital herpes, genital warts, gonorrhoea, hepatitis (A, B and C), non-specific urethritis, penile cancer, pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), prostate cancer, pubic lice, scabies, syphilis, testicular cancer, thrush and trichomonas vaginalis.

Free copies of any of these factsheets are available from GP surgeries, NHS sexual health (GUM) clinics, or your local health promotion unit (in the phone book under your local Health Authority).