



As women, we often talk about the cancers that affect us and hopefully go for routine breast and ovarian cancer checks regularly. But it's not just us we need to look out for. In South Africa, prostate cancer is the second most common cancer among men that results in death.

If we want to truly support the good health of our partners, brothers and fathers, we need to understand the disease – and how to help. So here are the basics: The prostate gland is located under the bladder and the urethra. Its smooth muscles assist in pushing out semen during ejaculation and it produces some of the fluid that carries sperm. Quite the multitasker, isn't it?

“Essentially, the five-year survival rate for men diagnosed with prostate cancer is over 92 percent; the 10-year survival rate of localised cancer is 93 percent. Even advanced disease can be slowed down and controlled with treatment, although not cured.”

FACTS AROUND PROSTATE CANCER

Of course, this wonder gland also happens to be responsible for the most common cancer among South African men, affecting one in six South Africans during their lifetime. While these stats are alarming, Dr Les Gellman, a urologist from Morningside Mediclinic in Johannesburg, explains that the slow progression of this type of cancer means many men are able to get the treatment they need in time.

“Many cases of prostate cancer are not aggressive and are slow-growing,” she says, “so the risk of dying from prostate cancer is about one in 34 men.” Still, this slow-growing nature also means that there are few glaringly obvious symptoms that could indicate prostate cancer.

“Most cases are detected by a combination of blood testing for PSA (prostate-specific antigen, which is protein produced by the prostate gland) and a digital (physical) rectal examination which, in general, should be done annually from the age of 50 in all men, and from the age of 40 in men with a family history of the disease,” explains Dr Gellman.

“A GP can check this and if any abnormality is found, the GP will refer him to a urologist to do an examination and, if indicated, a transrectal ultrasound. Biopsies are the only way to confirm a diagnosis.” It's only in the cases of very advanced prostate cancer that a man would start to experience symptoms such as blood in the urine, bone pain or urinary obstruction.

THE CAUSES

Certain predisposing factors, such as diet and supplements, can also heighten a man's risk of getting prostate cancer. “There has been some association with a diet high in fats and low in fresh fruit and vegetables, as well as with high testosterone levels, so testosterone supplementation may be a risk factor,” says Dr Gellman. Unfortunately, there are no proven measures to prevent prostate cancer.

The question remains, though; with a test so simple, why are men still only being diagnosed once they're in the advanced stages of a slow-growing disease? Dr Gellman believes it may be due to a fear many men have of the rectal exam.

“If a cancer can be picked up by such a simple test, then a moment or two of discomfort is preferable to dealing with a locally advanced cancer, or one that has spread. Advanced prostate cancer can result in terrible death and side effects from treatment of more advanced disease can be severe.” Instead, men should see a rectal examination as a necessary discomfort in the same way that women view their trips to the gynaecologist.

Psychologist Steven Kaplan, from Johannesburg, believes that another contributing factor to late diagnoses is the stigma that surrounds cancer. “Men are more likely to avoid the conversation, particularly when it is about a form of cancer with strong sexual overtones and connotations. With prostate cancer, the issue of shame and embarrassment is that much more likely.”

Addressing these factors that may be keeping the men in your life from getting a routine checkup is incredibly important, as diagnosis in the localised stages (before the cancer has spread) makes all the difference. “Essentially, the five-year survival rate for men diagnosed with prostate cancer is over 92 percent. This means that nearly all patients who

present with localised disease will live beyond five years. The 10-year survival rate of localised cancer is 93 percent. Even advanced disease can be slowed down and controlled with treatment, although not cured,” says Dr Gellman.

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT...

Create an open dialogue with the men you know to lessen their feelings of embarrassment around testing, and, if a male friend or family member has already been diagnosed, keep talking. “Illness naturally induces a sense of stress within a family,” Kaplan explains, “particularly around issues of safety and continuity. A spouse's response ranges from fear to sadness to panic, and everything in between. Often a partner's fear and sadness about the possible loss of their spouse can manifest in resentment towards the sick partner, which could result in issues of abandonment being brought up, followed by anger and defensiveness.”

The most important thing you can do is create an environment in which everyone can speak openly and honestly. Support them as much as possible and allow them to support you. Listen to them and respect their needs, bearing in mind that when one person in a partnership falls ill, they are not the only one whose needs will change.

You may also be surprised at how it can bring partners closer. “Illness can also bring about enormous expression of love, compassion and devotion between partners,” says Kaplan. There is no blueprint to dealing with cancer, but there is a first step – and that's always communication. Talk to the men in your life, because early diagnosis is key.” **E**



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Do you know of anyone with prostate cancer. Share with us your experiences on our facebook page with #ProstateCancer

HOTLINES FOR SUPPORT AND INFORMATION:
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