

# Prostate Cancer Screening: A Conversation Guide for Healthcare Providers



Tool to support providers in navigating shared decision-making conversations with their patients.

## 1 - Opening the Conversation

Prostate cancer screening can raise complex questions for patients. Brief, open-ended prompts can help gauge a patient's baseline understanding and readiness for shared decision-making:

- “Before we talk about prostate cancer screening, what do you know about the prostate and the kinds of issues it can cause as you get older?”
- “Have you or anyone in your family been affected by prostate cancer?”
- “Have you ever had a PSA test or discussed it with another provider?”

## 2 - Discuss Your Patient's Risk

Review your patient's potential risk factors for prostate cancer:

- **Age:** The risk of prostate cancer goes up with age — especially after age 50.
- **Family history:** Having a close relative such as a sibling or parent with prostate cancer increases a person's risk.
- **Race:** The risk of prostate cancer is higher for African American or Black people.\* Black people with prostates are at higher risk for developing more aggressive prostate cancer, and we don't fully understand all the reasons why.

\*Black and African American patients are at increased risk of developing and dying from prostate cancer due in part to racist systems and structures that have led to delays in care and other systemic barriers.

## 3 - Framing the PSA Test Conversation

Offer context: The PSA test is a blood test. It measures the level of prostate-specific antigen, which is a protein made by the prostate. A high PSA can be a sign of cancer, but it's more often caused by a naturally enlarged prostate or an inflamed prostate.

The PSA test has benefits and risks:

- **Benefits:** Can help catch harmful types of prostate cancer early when treatment tends to work better.
- **Risks:** Failure to rule out non-cancer-related causes of elevated PSA can lead to more tests, stress, and unnecessary treatments (like radiation and surgery) that can cause serious side effects.

## 4 - Helping the Patient Decide

Work with your patient to determine whether PSA screening is right for them:

- **Risk factors:** Review any risk factors that came up during your conversation.
- **Elicit goals and preferences:** Ask: “Now that we've talked a little about benefits and harms, what is most important to you?”
- **Making decisions:** Explore whether the patient wants time to consider or involve others. Ask: “Are you ready to make a decision today, or is there someone you'd like to talk it over with first?”
- **Check-in:** Ask: “Do you have enough information to make a decision?”

If the patient chooses not to test, affirm that you support their decision. Let them know the conversation can be revisited at any time. Consider checking in periodically.

Current prostate cancer screening guidelines and additional resources are available here:  
[mass.gov/ProstateHealth](https://mass.gov/ProstateHealth)

# Prostate Cancer Screening: Patient Decision Aid



## What is the Prostate Specific Antigen (PSA) test?

It's a blood test. It checks for levels of protein (prostate-specific antigen) made by the prostate. A PSA level can be high if there is prostate cancer, but it can also be high if your prostate is enlarged. An enlarged prostate does not mean you have prostate cancer.

## What are the benefits of getting a PSA test?

A high PSA level can be a sign that your prostate is enlarged. An enlarged prostate can cause problems with urination as you age, but there are medicines that can help. A high PSA can also be a sign of prostate cancer. The PSA test can help you catch these problems early, when they are easiest to address.

## Will I need a prostate exam with my PSA test?

A prostate exam (also known as a digital rectal exam or DRE) can provide more information, but it isn't required – especially if you are uncomfortable with it. You can still have the PSA blood test without the prostate exam.

## Besides a high PSA level, what raises my risk of prostate cancer?

- **Age:** The risk of prostate cancer goes up with age, especially after age 50.
- **Family history:** If you have a family history of prostate cancer — especially if your sibling or parent had it — your risk is significantly higher.
- **Race:** If you're African American or Black, you are also at an increased risk.

## What should I know before making a decision on the PSA test?

The PSA test helps your provider see if there are problems with the prostate — like infection, inflammation, enlargement, or prostate cancer.

If your PSA test result is high, your provider will check whether it's caused by something other than cancer and might also look at your PSA levels over time. Your provider may also suggest more tests, like an MRI. The MRI can help your provider understand if your prostate is enlarged or if there might be cancer.

Because the PSA test and MRI cannot tell for sure if you have prostate cancer, your provider may order a biopsy to confirm if you have prostate cancer.

Most prostate cancers grow slowly and are not likely to result in problems or death. For this reason, many prostate cancers are watched rather than treated.

If you are diagnosed with prostate cancer, you and your doctor will talk about whether treatment is right for you. This conversation would include your treatment options and possible side effects.

## How do I decide?

Have a conversation with your doctor to make a decision together. Your doctor can share their medical expertise, and you can share what you want out of your care (this is also called shared decision making). Ask your doctor questions about anything that is confusing, or you don't understand. Talk to your doctor, your family, and friends. Decide what's right for you.

# What happens after I get a PSA test?



At each step, talk with your doctor about the benefits and harms, and decide together what is right for you.

