

Digital Rectal Exam – An Important Part of Prostate Cancer Protection

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For well over a decade, men have understood the importance of a yearly prostate specific antigen (PSA) test with regard to screening for prostate cancer. Many men who undergo a yearly PSA feel that they can omit another part of the yearly examination, which is the digital rectal exam.

A recent study presented at the annual meeting of the American Urological Association found that the digital rectal examination remains a very important part of screening for men with regard to prostate cancer. This study found that the digital rectal examination can sometimes find prostate cancers even when the PSA test is normal.

During a digital rectal examination, the doctor inserts his or her gloved finger into the rectum to palpate the surface of the prostate. During this examination, the doctor can feel any irregularity or firmness that may be present on the surface of the gland. This recent study confirmed the fact that the digital rectal examination is still a clinically significant test, even when PSA levels are well within their normal range.

Like most cancers, prostate cancer is most likely to be treated successfully when it is found in the early stages of the disease. Early stage prostate cancer usually does not produce any symptoms, so the American Cancer Society recommends that doctors offer men the option of a yearly screening test for the disease using both the digital rectal examination and the PSA. The American Cancer Society recommends that men should begin screening at the age of 50, however, for high risk men with a positive family history or of African American origin, the testing should probably begin at the age of 40 to 45.

During the examination, the doctor will utilize a digital rectal examination to feel for any lumps or any other abnormalities present on the prostate. The PSA test checks blood levels of prostate specific antigen, which is a protein produced by the prostate gland. If the PSA test is normal and unchanged from the prior examination, and the digital rectal examination is normal as well, no further intervention is necessary. However, if either of these tests reveals an abnormality, further investigation may be necessary, with the possible need to biopsy the prostate.

In the recent presentation, researchers looked at the records of 971 men who had biopsies for prostate cancer. In men with an abnormal digital rectal examination and a PSA of less than 4, 26% of men who underwent biopsies were found to have prostate cancer. This means that if these men had skipped the digital rectal examination, and relied only on the PSA test, they may have missed the opportunity for early detection and treatment.

This study clearly shows that while the PSA is an extremely good tool to detect prostate cancer, it is not a perfect tool. By combining the PSA with the yearly rectal examination, doctors can significantly increase the likelihood of detecting abnormalities, including cancer. Finding prostate cancer before it produces symptoms will greatly increase the chance of successful treatment and cure.

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