



BASSETT HEALTHCARE

Prostate Cancer Awareness Month

September is Prostate Cancer Awareness Month. Prostate Cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer among men and the second leading cause of cancer related deaths for men. It is estimated that there will be over 220,000 new cases of prostate cancer diagnosed in the U.S. during 2003 according to the American Cancer Society.

Unlike most other cancers, there is a blood test, the Prostatic Specific Antigen or PSA, that has been shown to be quite effective, especially when combined with a digital rectal exam, for screening for this type of cancer. The use of this test is not without controversy for three primary reasons. The first is that the PSA level can be elevated when no cancer is actually present. This then leads to a relatively complicated and expensive work-up when there is no cancer. Secondly, the PSA may not be elevated even though a cancer is present. The use of the digital rectal exam in combination with the PSA test helps limit the number of times that cancers are missed but occasionally a cancer still might not be detected. Finally, there are many treatment options available when prostate cancer is diagnosed and one of those options includes watchful waiting. That means that there are many cases where it is appropriate to offer no treatment even though a cancer was found. Individuals in whom that approach is offered may still elect to be treated because they are uncomfortable not having treatment.

Studies are currently being done to see if other types of PSA tests or PSA tests combined with other blood tests are more accurate in finding prostate cancer and eliminating the need for evaluations in patients who don't have cancer. Additional studies are being done to see if dietary changes or use of certain drugs, vitamins or minerals are effective in preventing this disease from occurring at all or delaying its occurrence until very late in life. Research also continues to define new ways of treating this disease while decreasing the side effects associated with treatment.

Meanwhile, how does one decide whether or not to be screened? The American Cancer Society recommends that all Caucasian males over the age of 50 and all African-American males over the age of 45 be screened. Furthermore, they recommend that men who have had fathers, brothers or sons diagnosed with prostate cancer at an early age be screened starting at age 45 as well. The American Urological Association's guidelines are the same as the American Cancer Society's, but the United States Task Force on Preventive Services has found insufficient evidence to recommend any screening for prostate cancer.

Like many other areas in health care, the best decision is an individual one made in consultation with a physician or other health care provider. There needs to be an understanding that a positive blood test or digital rectal exam will mean that additional testing should be done and that a negative blood test does not mean that cancer is not present. As in most other cancers, an early diagnosis is associated with an increased chance for a cure. The fact that a simple association such as this has not been proven yet for prostate cancer doesn't necessarily mean that early detection won't save lives, it may only be indicating that sufficient proof has not yet been found to prove that lives will be saved.

Men who fit the criteria for screening as outlined above, who have not had a PSA in the past year and who do not have prostate cancer are eligible to take part in screenings offered by Bassett's Division of Urology and the Bassett Healthcare Regional Cancer Program.

Margaret A. Hoskins, RN, is a Physician Assistant and the Preventive Care Coordinator for Bassett Healthcare's Regional Cancer Program