

BACK PAIN CAN KILL



A significant number of people experience back pain during their lives. While this is usually the result of an injury or strain and inflammatory conditions such as arthritis, it may also be caused by something more sinister such as cancer.

Now before everyone rushes off to their GPs let me reassure you that these days this is not a common way of presentation for a diagnosis of cancer. However, in the past it was not uncommon for men to present with prostate cancer in this way. Also, women used to present with breast cancer and both sexes with lung cancer. It is important to note that these cancers presenting in this way are unlikely to be curable.

The reason it is not so common now is that we have programs to check for these conditions in the early and potentially curable stages. There are mammograms as well as ultrasound and biopsies for breast cancer. There is Prostate Specific Antigen (PSA) blood tests, prostate examination and multi-parametric Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) for prostate cancer. These tests may indicate the need for a biopsy.

While the PSA test is not a specific test for prostate cancer, it does tell us if there is a change happening within a man's prostate. That change may be the usual enlargement which occurs as men get older, inflammation or be the result of various physical activities including sex, exercise, bike riding and others which may cause the test to increase.

In 2014 at the Prostate Cancer World Congress held in Melbourne an attempt was made to deal with the conflicting advice issued with regard to testing for possible prostate cancer. The result was the Melbourne Consensus Statement which consisted of five statements.

The statements may be summarised as:

1. Tested men aged 50-69 are less likely to die from prostate cancer or have it spread from the prostate to other parts of the body.
2. Not all men diagnosed with prostate cancer require aggressive treatment to live their normal lifespans.
3. The man must be considered as an individual. There may be a family history of the disease or he may have other conditions which may be more life threatening such as heart disease.
4. A PSA test in the 40's is useful to predict the future risk of prostate cancer. It can help sort the men into the need for more frequent or less frequent testing and help men decide with their doctors whether they wish to pursue testing further.
5. Older men (over 70) with a life expectancy of more than ten years should not be denied testing.

The important thing is that most people would like to live for a long time and a good time and in weighing things up, treatment and its consequences should not be worse than the condition.



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Prostate Cancer

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