



## The Prostate and Prostate Cancer

The prostate is a gland that sits below the bladder and is wrapped around the water pipe or urethra. Its major function is to produce seminal fluid or semen which is then stored in a small gland called the seminal vesicle until the time of ejaculation. As the prostate is at the junction of the urinary and reproductive systems for men, this means that any change in the prostate or enlargement can cause trouble passing urine.

As men get older, there are two separate things that happen to the prostate. The first is that the prostate enlarges and this may cause the prostate to squeeze in on the urethra and push up on the bladder and make passing urine more difficult. Many men as they get older will therefore report symptoms such as decreased urinary flow, having to wait for the flow to start, an interrupted flow, a feeling of incomplete emptying and getting up at night to pass urine.

Having these symptoms does not mean that they are more likely to develop prostate cancer or are more likely to have prostate cancer. These are simply the symptoms of an ageing and enlarged prostate.

These changes are called BPH or benign prostatic hyperplasia. However, independent of all this, as men get older, their risk of having prostate cancer increases. Prostate cancer is now the most commonly diagnosed cancer affecting men beyond middle age and a second only to lung cancer as a cause of cancer deaths. The lifetime risk of developing microscopic or minimal prostate cancer is approximately 30%, however, as many of these cancers develop very slowly, the lifetime risk of a cancer becoming apparent or causing problems is only about 10%. The lifetime risk of actually dying from prostate cancer is only approximately 2-3%. The latest figures available in Australia show approximately 2,500 deaths due to prostate cancer in 1995 and almost 12,000 cases diagnosed in that year. The incidence has fallen and in 1997, only 9,725 men were newly diagnosed with prostate cancer. This translates as 110 cases/100,000 men which is down from a peak 160/100,000 in 1994. Median age of diagnosis of prostate cancer is approximately 71 years.

It is important to note that less than 5% of new cases have metastatic or distant spread at the time of diagnosis. The overall outlook for men with prostate cancer is very good and it is important to note that the five year survival from prostate cancer in men diagnosed in NSW between 1991 and 1995, was 83%.