

Good news on horizon for men with prostate cancer

Specialists hope cancer will transform from lethal disease to chronic condition



PSA tests should be considered in men from age 50. Men with a family history of prostate, breast or ovarian cancer, and black men are considered at higher risk and should start PSA testing at age 45.

Dr. Stuart Edmonds is excited. With many advances over the past quarter century, and particularly the past decade, in the diagnosis and treatment of prostate cancer, the vice-president of Research, Health Promotion and Survivorship at Prostate Cancer Canada believes medical experts are getting much closer to turning prostate cancer into a more controllable disease.

That's good news because prostate cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer among Canadian men – at a rate of one in seven. And new therapies have made it possible to prolong the lives of affected men by years. "Right now we have the good situation of actually trying to understand the sequencing of these new therapies to maximize survival

and quality of life for patients," Dr. Edmonds says.

The most recent breakthroughs mean there are now, finally, potential treatments for men at every stage of the disease. Until as recently as 18 months ago, there was no treatment for men with non-metastatic castration-resistant prostate cancer, an advanced stage when patients no longer respond to hormone therapy but whose cancer has not yet spread outside of the prostate.

Stuck with levels of prostate-specific antigen (PSA) in the blood rising but not sick enough for the next stage of treatment, men had little recourse but anxious waiting.

Through that time, doctors track PSA levels using a simple blood

test that measures the amount of the protein, which is made in the prostate but also enters the bloodstream. PSA levels are used for cancer staging, treatment planning and checking treatment results. In addition, regular monitoring of men with this test helps doctors measure PSA "doubling time" – how quickly levels of the protein double. A faster doubling time means the patient has a higher risk of the cancer spreading.

"What's critical is a lot of researchers are developing new treatments for men who don't have metastatic disease but still have an advanced form of prostate cancer," explains Dr. Edmonds. "We can actually treat men much earlier, and the only way to do that is if we see the PSA levels rise in a more pronounced way. So

the PSA plays a really important role in understanding progression and will be a really good indicator of when a man will need new treatments."

With so many developments in the treatment of prostate cancer in the past several years – and with more on the horizon – Dr. Edmonds hopes that scientists, over the next 25 years, will find new drugs and treatments will transform prostate cancer from a rapidly lethal disease into a more chronic condition.

"Think about diabetes 100 years ago," says Dr. Bobby Shayegan, associate professor and head of urology at McMaster University in Hamilton. "It killed people. We haven't cured diabetes, but we turned it from an acute and lethal

WHY TAKE THE TEST?

Prostate cancer becomes lethal when it spreads to other parts of the body. "Cancers, like viruses, are clever and they learn ways to circumvent therapies," Dr. Shayegan explains. "The problem we have now is that when resistance develops to one drug and we go onto the next drug, there's also cross resistance between different drugs."

Early detection is key. While there has been some controversy about who and when to screen for prostate cancer because of the possibility of overscreening and overtreatment, experts such as Drs. Shayegan and Edmonds agree that PSA tests should be strongly considered in men from age 50. Men with a family history of prostate cancer and black men are considered at higher risk and should start PSA testing at age 45.

"The best thing is if you screen patients, [we can] capture the ones that need to be captured early enough that you can cure them without overtreating those that don't need to be treated," Dr. Shayegan says. "Once they show up with metastases, do I think they're curable? I hope so, but we really have not been able to do that across any cancer in any reasonable numbers."

disease into a chronic disease that is controllable."

And with much research under way to identify next-generation treatments, there's a feeling among experts that this is the direction in which prostate cancer is heading.

To learn more, go to Prostate Cancer Canada's website at prostatecancer.ca.

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