



# PSA: Pros and cons

**Melina Gattellari**, BSc(Hons), MPH(Hons), is a Postgraduate Fellow, Division of Population Health, South West Sydney Area Health Service and School of Public Health, University of Sydney, New South Wales.

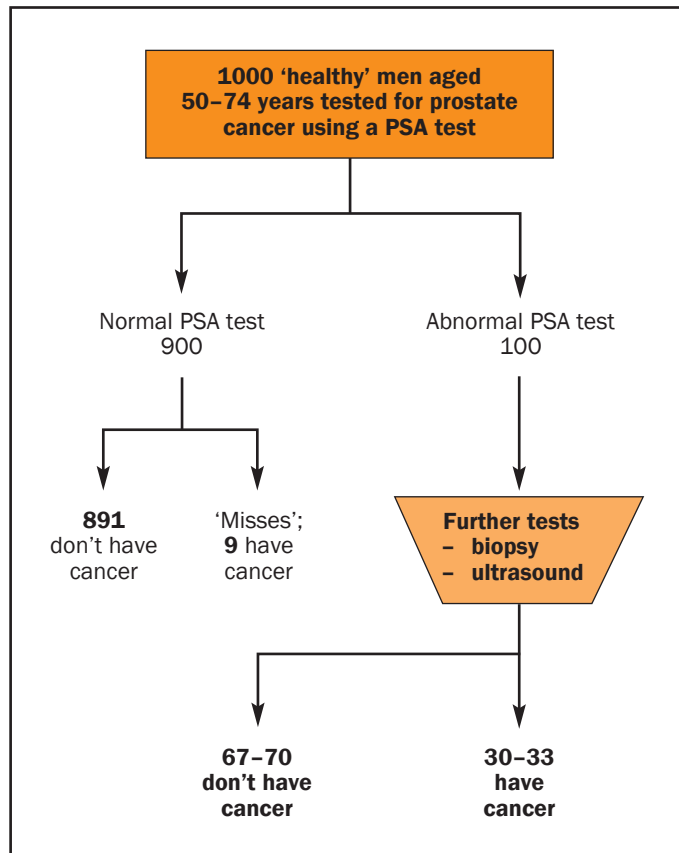
**Jeanette E Ward**, MBBS, MHPed, PhD, FAFPHM, is Director, Division of Population Health, South West Sydney Area Health Service, New South Wales.

## Possible benefits

Some doctors advise men to have regular PSA tests from about 50 years of age until they are 70, even if they have no symptoms of prostate cancer. The reasons for having regular tests are:

- ❑ Unlike lung cancer and heart disease, doctors are unsure how to prevent prostate cancer
- ❑ Early prostate cancer does not cause symptoms
- ❑ PSA tests can help find cancer early
- ❑ Men diagnosed with early prostate cancer tend to live longer than those with cancers that have spread outside the prostate
- ❑ Prostate cancer that has spread outside the prostate gland generally cannot be cured.

Therefore, having regular PSA tests may reduce the chances of dying from prostate cancer.



## Possible risks

There are no real risks to having a blood test, but some doctors say it isn't as simple as it seems. Having a PSA test can have negative consequences that could affect a man's quality of life. Facts to consider when deciding whether to be tested for prostate cancer are:

- ❑ Some prostate cancers don't threaten life. This means that finding cancer early may not make any difference to how long a man will live. A PSA test may detect these so-called 'harmless' cancers as well as more severe forms
- ❑ Researchers have yet to find out whether detecting prostate cancer early improves men's chances of living a longer life. (Studies are currently underway, but the results won't be available until the end of the decade)
- ❑ Some men having a PSA test may find out they have a cancer that never would have threatened their lives or that they would have never known about. Some men may then undergo treatment that they do not need
- ❑ There is no definite proof that treatments for early stage prostate cancer improve men's chances of living a longer life compared with observation or 'watchful waiting'. However, doctors believe that the younger a man is the more likely it is he will benefit from treatment
- ❑ Treatments for early stage prostate cancer can cause impotence (failure to get an erection) and incontinence (uncontrollable loss of urine). These side effects are permanent.

Source: Gattellari M, Ward J E. Does evidence based information about prostate cancer screening enhance consumer decision making? A randomised controlled trial. *J Med Screen* 2003; 10(1):27-39.

# So should I have a PSA test for prostate cancer?

There are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers. No-one can tell you if having a test is 'right' for you. You need information to make an **INFORMED CHOICE**.

**Take the time to read the following statements and ask yourself: Would I react in this way?**

## **Does this sound like you?**

- ☐ You are worried about prostate cancer. Having a PSA test will reassure you 'that everything is okay'
- ☐ You have a family history of prostate cancer
- ☐ You are prepared to accept the chance that a PSA test might find a cancer that may never cause you problems. You would rather know if you had cancer
- ☐ PSA tests are not yet proven to save lives. But in the future we may find out that they do. You think it is better to be 'safe than sorry'
- ☐ If you were diagnosed with prostate cancer, you would be prepared to accept the side effects of treatment OR you could live with knowing you had cancer even if you chose not to have treatment

**If this sounds like you, you might think about having a PSA test.**

## **Or does this sound more like you?**

- ☐ You are not worried about prostate cancer
- ☐ You do not want to risk finding out you have cancer when it may never bother you
- ☐ If you found out you had cancer, you would not want treatment that could affect your quality of life
- ☐ PSA tests are not yet proven to save lives. You do not want to risk a good quality of life for a possible but unproven chance of a longer one
- ☐ You are prepared to accept the possibility that researchers may later find out that PSA tests benefit men's health

**If this sounds like you, then you might consider not having a PSA test.**