

UNDERSTANDING PROSTATE CANCER SURGERY TREATMENT PATHWAY

Prostate cancer is one of the most common cancers affecting men worldwide. It occurs when abnormal cells develop in the prostate gland—a small, walnut-shaped gland in men responsible for producing seminal fluid. While prostate cancer often grows slowly and may not cause immediate harm, in some cases, it can be aggressive and spread to other parts of the body.

CAUSES AND RISK FACTORS

The exact cause of prostate cancer is not fully understood, but several factors increase a man's risk, including:

AGE

- The risk increases significantly after age 50.

FAMILY HISTORY

- Having a close relative with prostate cancer doubles the risk.

ETHNICITY

- Prostate cancer is more common in African American men and less common in Asian men.

LIFESTYLE FACTOR

- Obesity, a diet high in red meat and low in vegetables, and lack of physical activity may contribute to risk.

SYMPTOMS OF PROSTATE CANCER

Early-stage prostate cancer may not cause symptoms. However, as the disease progresses, symptoms may include:

- Difficulty urinating or a weak urine flow
- Frequent urination, especially at night
- Blood in the urine or semen
- Erectile dysfunction
- Pain in the back, hips, or pelvis (indicating advanced disease)

DIAGNOSIS OF PROSTATE CANCER

Common diagnostic tools include:

PROSTATE-SPECIFIC ANTIGEN (PSA) TEST

- Measures PSA levels in the blood. Elevated levels may indicate prostate cancer.

DIGITAL RECTAL EXAM (DRE)

- A physical exam to detect abnormalities in the prostate.

BIOPSY

- A small tissue sample is taken from the prostate to confirm the presence of cancer.

IMAGING TESTS

- MRI, CT scans, or bone scans may be used to assess the extent of the disease.

TREATMENT OPTIONS FOR PROSTATE CANCER

The choice of treatment depends on factors like cancer stage, patient age, overall health, and personal preferences. Common options include:

ACTIVE SURVEILLANCE

- Monitoring low-risk cancers with regular PSA tests and biopsies.

RADIATION THERAPY:

- Using high-energy beams to target and destroy cancer cells.

HORMONE THERAPY

- Reducing androgen levels to slow cancer growth.

PROSTATECTOMY

- Surgical removal of the prostate gland, often performed in localised cancers or when other treatments are unsuitable.

LIFE AFTER PROSTATECTOMY: WHAT PATIENTS AND THEIR PARTNERS SHOULD KNOW

Prostatectomy is a common and effective treatment for prostate cancer, but it comes with physical and emotional challenges that affect both the patient and their partner. Here's what to expect and how to cope:

PHYSICAL EFFECTS OF PROSTATECTOMY

1. INCONTINENCE

- Urinary incontinence is a common side effect of prostatectomy due to the proximity of the prostate to the urinary sphincter. While many men regain bladder control over time, some may experience persistent leakage.

MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

- Pelvic floor exercises (Kegel exercises) are highly effective in strengthening the muscles involved in urinary control. In severe cases, medications, absorbent pads, or surgical interventions may be necessary.

2. ERECTILE DYSFUNCTION (ED)

- The nerves responsible for erections are located near the prostate and may be affected during surgery, leading to temporary or permanent ED. The extent of ED depends on factors like age, pre-surgery erectile function, and whether nerve-sparing techniques were used.

TREATMENT OPTIONS MEDICATIONS

- PDE5 inhibitors (e.g., sildenafil, tadalafil) can help restore erectile function.

VACUUM ERECTION DEVICES (VEDS)

- These devices use a vacuum to increase blood flow and create an erection.

PENILE INJECTIONS

- Alprostadil injections directly into the penis may be effective when oral medications fail.

PENILE IMPLANTS

- For severe or irreversible ED, surgical implants may provide a long-term solution.

REHABILITATION PROGRAMS

- Post-surgery penile rehabilitation programs focus on restoring erectile function over time and keeping the penile tissue healthy to reduce atrophy (shortening) and fibrosis (loss of elasticity) which can have significant effects on quality of life and comfort of urinary function.

3. HORMONAL CHANGES

- If the testicles were also removed or hormonal therapy accompanies treatment, men may experience reduced testosterone levels, affecting energy, libido, and mood.

4. ORGASMIC CHANGES

- Men can still experience orgasm after prostatectomy, but it may feel different due to the absence of seminal fluid (dry orgasms). This change may take time to adjust to emotionally and physically. Some men also experience climacturia which is the ejaculation of urine; this typically happens early on post operation and usually resolves but can be ongoing and can be of concern to the man.

COPING WITH EMOTIONAL AND RELATIONSHIP CHANGES

Prostatectomy can profoundly affect self-esteem, intimacy, and emotional well-being. Open communication and mutual understanding are essential for navigating these changes.

1. EMOTIONAL HEALTH

- Patients may experience anxiety, depression, or a sense of loss due to changes in sexual function and body image. Partners may also feel worried about the patient's health and the impact on their relationship.

- Counseling and Support Groups: Joining support groups for men with prostate cancer or seeking therapy can help both patients and partners process these emotions and find a sense of community.

2. INTIMACY AND SEXUALITY

- Rebuilding intimacy after prostatectomy requires patience and exploration. Focus on non-sexual forms of closeness, such as hugging, touching, or shared activities.

SEX THERAPY

- A sex therapist can provide practical advice and emotional support to help couples rekindle their intimacy.

3. PARTNER INVOLVEMENT

- Partners play a critical role in emotional support, attending appointments, and participating in recovery efforts. Open discussions about fears, needs, and expectations can strengthen the relationship.

HOPE AND RECOVERY

While a prostatectomy can bring challenges, it is also a life-saving treatment that allows many men to overcome prostate cancer and live full, active lives. Recovery varies for each individual, but with modern medical advancements and a strong support system, many men regain control of their physical and emotional well-being.

PEER-REVIEWED REFERENCES

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