

The prostate prescription: Self-care alternatives for young and old

Most men experience a prostate disorder at some point in their lives. Chronic prostatitis, benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH), prostate cancer -- are the commonest ailments. Lifestyle strategies play a key role in prostate health for men young and old, and often succeed where conventional treatments fail.

Prostatitis: not just an old man's problem

Chronic prostatitis -- inflammation of the prostate (a walnut-size gland beneath the bladder) -- affects many men between 20 and 50. Prostatitis involves inflammation in the three to four dozen pouchlike reservoirs that hold prostatic fluid, which helps carry sperm during ejaculation. The openings can become obstructed and incapable of emptying properly during ejaculation, leading to a painful buildup of fluid and interfering with urination and sexual functioning.

Benign prostatic hyperplasia

Benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH) occurs in nearly 60 percent of men between 40 and 59, and is caused by hormonal changes that accompany aging. These changes result in the overproduction of prostate cells and enlargement of the gland, which puts pressure on the urethra and interferes with urination.

Prostate cancer

The most common form of cancer in men, prostate cancer is usually slow growing and rarely presents symptoms. Indeed, the cancer may be present for years without detectable symptoms, or it might show symptoms identical to those of BPH. The cancer can, however, spread and become life threatening; it's the second-leading cause of cancer death in men. Prostate cancer is most common in men over 65.

Lifelong prescriptions for a healthy prostate

Conventional medicine relies on invasive procedures and drugs to treat the conditions of prostate disorders, with the possibility of serious side effects. What can a man do on his own to support the health of his prostate? The well-being of this gland is directly tied to his daily behavioral and lifestyle choices. Here are some noninvasive ways to keep and improve prostate health:

Exercise regularly. It's not uncommon for a man to spend most of his waking hours sitting in chairs or on car seats -- in effect, sitting on his prostate, compressing a gland already vulnerable to poor circulation. Vigorous exercise, as well as gentler forms such as walking, stimulates the prostate and helps give it the circulation and nourishment it needs. A recent study found that men who walked two to three hours per week had a 25 percent lower risk of BPH. Other helpful habits include climbing stairs rather than taking elevators, and doing squats between long stretches of sitting.

Manage your stress levels. One focus of the NIH study is a possible link between stress and prostatitis. Stress increases the production of prolactin, a hormone found to cause prostate inflammation in laboratory animals. If a connection is confirmed in humans, stress management will take on new importance for prostatitis sufferers. Many men have already discovered that a daily practice of meditation or deep relaxation helps alleviate prostatitis symptoms.

Supplement your diet. Supplements known to benefit prostate health include essential fatty acids, certain amino acids, the B vitamins, vitamins C and E, and especially zinc. Chief among the herbs that benefit the prostate is saw palmetto berry extract. A typical dose is 160 mg of extract twice daily.

Have sex in moderation. Men with prostate disorders are often mistakenly encouraged to have more frequent ejaculations. This can actually weaken the gland and deplete its reserves of vital nutrients. It may also exacerbate symptoms of prostatitis.

Eliminate offending foods. Poor nutrition plays a major role in prostate symptoms. The most common offenders are high-fat and high-carbohydrate foods, citrus fruits, spices, alcohol and caffeine, all of which irritate the genitourinary tract.

Adapted from "The prostate prescription: Self-care alternatives for young and old", June 16, 1999, by William Collinge, Ph.D., Copyright 1999 by WebMD, Inc.