

Hawkes Bay Today Vital Signs Column, November 2011.

Prostate Problems

Each year, Movember, is responsible for the sprouting of moustaches on thousands of men's faces in New Zealand and around the world, to raise funds and awareness for men's health.

Problems and diseases of the prostate are common health concerns facing men but the good news is that there is a lot you can do to monitor your own prostate health and keep yourself fit and healthy.

The prostate gland is located at the base of the bladder and is part of the male reproductive system. It is about the size of a walnut and the fluid it secretes mixes with semen and nourishes sperm. The gland encircles the urethra and most of the signs of prostate problems relate to urine flow changes. The most common prostate problems are enlargement of the prostate (also called benign prostatic hyperplasia), inflammation of the prostate and cancer.

Benign Prostatic Hyperplasia (BPH) is a normal, gradual enlargement of the prostate caused by hormonal changes, usually starting in middle age and affecting about half of men aged over 50 years. The prostate gland becomes larger and less flexible, squeezing the urethra and disrupting normal urine flow. If you experience the following symptoms, it is important to talk to your doctor.

- Having to wait for the urine stream to start
- Poor or variable flow of urine
- Frequent urination
- Urgency
- Dribbling of urine at the end of urination
- Having to wake at night to pass urine multiple times

If BPH causes no symptoms, it requires no treatment – it only leads to problems if the enlargement narrows the urethra and makes it difficult to pass urine. If treatment is required, it may involve lifestyle changes, reducing fluid intake, medicines to relax muscles and shrinking the gland or surgery for more severe cases. Reducing your intake of alcohol and caffeine may help relieve your symptoms.

Prostatitis is usually caused by the blockage or irritation of some of the ducts within the prostate gland, often from an infection. The lower abdomen/groin area may feel tender or painful and you may get a fever. See your doctor quickly if you have these symptoms because you may need antibiotics. Prostatitis affects both younger and older men equally.

Prostate cancer is a serious condition and the most common cancer type for men in New Zealand, with around 3000 cases diagnosed each year. The difficulty is that many men do not have symptoms until the cancer is established. But it is a slow-growing cancer and, if detected early, in certain cases it can be treated effectively.

The causes of prostate cancer are not yet fully understood, but the risk of developing prostate cancer increases with age and family history. There is some evidence that a diet high in animal fat increases the chance of developing prostate cancer. Men experiencing any of the signs of prostate problems such as blood in the urine or semen, or pain on passing urine need to get to the doctor urgently.

On a positive note, maintaining a good diet, sensible lifestyle choices and getting regular medical check-ups can dramatically influence your health. Here's a quick checklist for men to optimise health (more info at <http://au.movember.com/mens-health/>)

1. Book for a yearly check-up with your doctor
2. Don't smoke
3. Be physically active
4. Eat a healthy diet full of fruit, veges, whole grains and lean meats.
5. Stay at a healthy weight
6. Manage your stress
7. Drink alcohol in moderation
8. Know your family health history