

What You Need to Know About an Enlarged Prostate (BPH)

What does my prostate do?

Your prostate makes semen.

What causes it to enlarge?

The prostate enlarges as you age, because cells inside the gland slowly multiply and grow (why this happens is not understood very well). These cells are called benign because they do not cause cancer. About half of men over age 60 have an enlarged prostate, also called BPH, which is short for benign prostatic hyperplasia. By age 85 nearly all men have it.

What happens if my prostate becomes enlarged?

Your prostate surrounds your urethra, the tube that urine and semen go through. If the prostate gets too big, it can squeeze your urethra and interfere with how you urinate. It may also block the flow of semen. Only about 33% of men with BPH will have bothersome symptoms.

Symptoms of an enlarged prostate primarily involve urination:

- Frequent urination, especially at night
- Urgent need to urinate; inability to hold it
- Feeling like your bladder isn't empty, even right after you urinate
- Weak, slow urinary flow
- Trouble or a delay starting to urinate, which may be referred to as hesitancy
- Dribbling of urine

You may also have sexual symptoms. You could have difficulty getting or keeping an erection, known as erectile dysfunction, or if semen goes up into your bladder, you might have a dry orgasm. If that happens, the semen gets passed later with your urine.

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Men's Sexual and Urinary Health: BPH

How can my doctor tell if I have BPH?

First, your doctor will ask about your:

- Current or past health problems and surgeries
- Use of prescription and over-the-counter medicines
- Family medical history, especially of prostate problems
- Symptoms

At the same appointment, you'll give a urine sample to check for infection, which can have similar symptoms as BPH. You'll also give a blood sample to check your prostate specific antigen (PSA) levels to help evaluate your risk for prostate cancer. Having BPH does not make your chance of getting prostate cancer any higher or lower.

The easiest way for your doctor to check the size and consistency (lumpiness) of your prostate is with a digital rectal exam. To do this, your doctor gently inserts a gloved finger into your rectum. A normal prostate is about the size of a whole walnut, so he or she can tell you right then if yours is enlarged.

Is there anything I can do to help symptoms on my own?

You may get some relief by:

- Reducing the amount of caffeine and alcohol you drink
- Drinking less of all types of liquid
- Urinating on a regular schedule, especially before going to bed

Does BPH have to be treated?

Not always. Your doctor will help you decide about treatment based on what symptoms you have, how severe those symptoms are, and how much they affect your quality of life. If your symptoms are mild, you may not need treatment.