

PROSTATE- CANCER UPDATE

Get the facts on how you can help protect your man

Prostate cancer is the most common cancer in American men, and Black men are 66 percent more likely than White men to develop the disease and two to three times more likely to die of it, according to the American Cancer Society. But if caught early, prostate cancer is one of the most curable forms of cancer. Isaac Powell, M.D., a professor of urology at Wayne State University in Detroit and a prostate-cancer survivor himself, spells out what Black women and their men need to know about screening, diagnosis and treatment:

By Aliyah Baruchin



ESSENCE: *What is the prostate?*

Powell: The prostate is a gland located at the base of the bladder. It has two functions: It opens and closes the urethra, the tube through which urine flows from the bladder to the penis, and it produces semen, which provides nutrients to the sperm and allows sperm to move in the vagina.

ESSENCE: *What are the symptoms of prostate cancer?*

Powell: Unfortunately prostate cancer doesn't have any specific symptoms, particularly in the early stages. Some patients may complain of nocturia, meaning they get up more than twice a night to urinate, or they may have blood in their urine or have difficulty urinating. But you can have those symptoms and not have prostate cancer, and you can have prostate cancer without any symptoms. That's why getting tested regularly is so important.

ESSENCE: *What are the tests?*

Powell: Prostate cancer screening consists of two tests. The first is a digital rectal examination (DRE), in which the doctor inserts his finger in the patient's rectum and feels the prostate for any nodules or hard areas. Men should also get a prostate-specific antigen (PSA) blood test, which measures the amount of a protein produced by the prostate gland. A PSA between zero and four is normal. An abnormal PSA doesn't automatically mean a person has this form of cancer, but it is a cause for further investigation. The PSA is about 40 to 45 percent accurate; the DRE about 20 to 25 percent accurate. Combined, the tests can provide close to 65 percent accuracy.

ESSENCE: *Who should be screened?*

Powell: Black men and anyone with a close relative who has had prostate cancer should be tested annually starting at age 40 to 45.

ESSENCE: *Why are African-American men more likely to get this disease and die from it?*

Powell: We're not sure. Genetics may play a part. Researchers are investigating whether certain abnormal genes that may be more prevalent in African-Americans cause prostate cancers to develop more frequently and grow more aggressively. And there are a number of reasons the mortality rate for African-American men is so high. One is diet; we know that a high-fat diet causes prostate cancer to progress, and Black men tend to have a fattier diet. In addition, African-Americans are less likely to be

screened for this illness and are less likely to seek treatment. This is usually out of fear—of the DRE, of the diagnosis and of the treatment, which can result in the loss of sexual function.

ESSENCE: *What are the treatment options?*

Powell: Traditional treatments include radical prostatectomy, in which the entire gland is removed. The benefit of this approach is that if the cancer is confined within the capsule of the gland, the cure rate is 95 percent. The drawback is loss of sexual function—the overall rate of impotency is 50 percent. Another treatment is external beam radiation therapy, an outpatient procedure. Alternative procedures include the use of radiation seeds, which are implanted in the prostate, and cryosurgery, in which ice is injected into the prostate to freeze it. But all these treatments carry the risk of losing some form of sexual function.

ESSENCE: *Is that why men avoid getting the necessary screening?*

Powell: Oh, yes. When I counsel patients about treatment options, I typically talk to the men and their wives, and I've had men tell me that if they can't function sexually, they'd rather be dead. The wives, of course, think their husbands have lost their mind. But I remind these men that there are some great new treatments for impotence, such as Viagra.

ESSENCE: *How has your personal experience with prostate cancer affected your work?*

Powell: I'm a five-year prostate-cancer survivor. Experiencing the disease firsthand has made me even more committed. Once I tell my patients that I'm a survivor, they're more hopeful." ▸

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