

# Patient information from BMJ

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## Enlarged prostate: what is it?

**Only men have a prostate gland. The prostate can get larger as men get older. This can cause problems, such as having to get up at night to urinate.**

**But an enlarged prostate isn't usually a serious health problem. After discussing your options with your doctor you might choose to wait before deciding to have any treatment.**

### What is the prostate?

The prostate is a small, solid gland about the size of a walnut. It is at the base of your bladder.

The front of your prostate is wrapped around your **urethra**, the tube that carries urine and semen out of your body. The back of your prostate rests against your back passage (rectum). Your doctor can feel the prostate through the wall of your rectum.

A change in the size or shape of your prostate can narrow the urethra, making it difficult for you to urinate.

Many men's prostate glands get larger as they get older. When this happens doctors call it **benign prostatic hyperplasia**, or **BPH**. You may also hear it called **LUTS**, which is short for lower urinary tract symptoms.

**BPH is not cancer** and it isn't usually a serious health problem. But the symptoms of BPH can be difficult to live with.

Many men find it difficult to talk to their doctors about prostate problems. But there's no need to be embarrassed. Your doctor will have seen many men with your symptoms.

### What are the symptoms of an enlarged prostate?

You might notice some of the symptoms of BPH or LUTS as you get older. It's important to get these symptoms checked by a doctor, because some BPH symptoms are similar to those of more serious conditions such as **prostate cancer**.

Your doctor might also be able to give you some simple advice that can help your symptoms without any treatment. Symptoms of an enlarged prostate include:

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- having to wait before you can start urinating
- stopping and starting when urinating
- having to push or strain to urinate
- having a weak stream of urine
- feeling like your bladder's never quite empty
- having to urinate more often than you used to
- finding it difficult to put off urinating
- needing to get up at night to urinate
- dribbling after you pass urine
- often feeling desperate to urinate (this is called urgency).

Having an enlarged prostate can also affect you in other ways. For example, you might:

- feel tired because you never sleep through the night
- feel anxious during the day if you're not close to a toilet, or
- find that it distrupts your daily life. For example, you might stop playing sports or going out with friends.

### Do I need treatment?

This is a difficult question to answer. Only you can decide whether your symptoms are bothering you so much that you'd like some treatment.

But your doctor might suggest that you have treatment if he or she thinks that there is a danger that your symptoms could lead to worse problems.

If you don't find your symptoms too troublesome your doctor may suggest that you try **watchful waiting**. This means that you see your doctor regularly to monitor your symptoms, but you don't have any other treatment for the time being.

Your doctor might suggest some things that may help with your symptoms. There isn't much research about the following tips, but they might help.

- Avoid drinking large amounts of liquid at any one time.
- Avoid drinks altogether before going to bed.
- Reduce the amount of alcohol you drink (alcohol can stimulate your bladder).
- Cut back on coffee, tea, cola, or any other drinks that contain caffeine (caffeine can stimulate your bladder).
- Discuss with your doctor any medicines you are taking. Some antihistamines (drugs used to treat allergies) and some drugs used to treat depression can make your problems with urinating worse.

When you go for check-ups your doctor will ask whether your symptoms have got any worse and if you think you would like any treatment.

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He or she might discuss the benefits and risks of different treatments with you. To learn more, see our leaflet: *Enlarged prostate: what treatments are there?*

### What will happen to me if I choose not to have treatment?

No one can tell you for certain whether your symptoms will get worse over time. But BPH doesn't usually get worse quickly, so you don't have to rush into having treatment.

Many men find that their symptoms gradually get worse as they get older. But this is not always the case.

- Some men find that their symptoms change slowly.
- Others find that they don't change at all.
- Some men even find that their symptoms get better on their own.

Although it's usually harmless, BPH can sometimes cause serious complications.

For example, it can make you unable to urinate at all. This is called **acute urinary retention**. It needs to be treated urgently, usually with surgery. Serious problems like this happen to about 10 in 100 men with BPH.

Getting treatment with BPH can reduce your chance of getting serious problems. Still, doctors often advise men to wait and see what happens before they start treatment. This is because symptoms don't usually change very quickly.

If your symptoms do change quickly, though, you should see your doctor right away.

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