

Panel Advises Against Prostate Cancer Screening

AP Medical Writer= WASHINGTON (AP) — Those PSA blood tests that check for prostate cancer do more harm than good and healthy men should no longer receive them as part of routine cancer screening, a government panel is recommending.

The recommendation by the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, being made public on Friday, will not be a surprise to cancer specialists.

No major medical group recommends routine PSAs, and the government panel's guidelines had long advised men over 75 to forgo them. The new recommendation extends that do-not-screen advice to healthy men of all ages. Yet, the vast majority of men over 50 have had at least one PSA blood test. The assumption is that finding cancer early is always a good thing.

Not so, said Dr. Virginia Moyer of the Baylor College of Medicine, who heads the task force. "We have put a huge amount of time, effort and energy into PSA screening and that time, effort and energy, that passion, should be going into finding a better test instead of using a test that doesn't work," Moyer told The Associated Press late Thursday.

Too much PSA, or prostate-specific antigen, in the blood only sometimes signals prostate cancer is brewing. It also can mean a benign enlarged prostate or an infection. Worse, screening often detects small tumors that will prove too slow-growing to be deadly. And there's no sure way to tell in advance who needs aggressive therapy.

The task force analyzed all the previous research on this subject, including five major studies, to evaluate whether routine screening reduces deaths from prostate cancer. The conclusion: There's little if any mortality benefit. But there is harm from routine screening: impotence, incontinence, infections, even death that can come from the biopsies, surgery and radiation, Moyer said.

One study estimated 2 of every 5 men whose prostate cancer was caught through a PSA test had tumors too slow-growing to ever be a threat. Yet Moyer said 30 percent of men who are treated for PSA-discovered prostate cancer suffer significant side effects, sometimes death, from the resulting treatment.

About a third of men ages 40 to 60 have brewing prostate cancer but "the huge majority of them will never know it in their lifetime if they are not screened," she added.

The task force previously had considered the evidence for or against PSA screening inconclusive. The new recommendation says not to routinely screen. That recommendation is a draft that is open for public comment beginning next week.

"We have been long concerned, and it has been apparent for some years, that some supporters of prostate cancer screening have overstated, exaggerated and in some cases misled men about the evidence supporting its effectiveness," said Dr. Otis Brawley of the American Cancer Society in a statement. "We need balanced, truthful information to be made widely available to physicians and patients when making important health decisions."