

# DON'T put your head in the sand

## A simple blood test is now the frontline defence against prostate cancer

WORDS Claire Burke

Prostate health is something many men would rather not think about — let alone discuss with their GP. But modern screening is far simpler (and less uncomfortable) than you might think.

Grandfather of two Stan Soutaris had no cause to suspect an issue with his prostate. He had no family history, wasn't peeing more often than usual and had no problems with his urine stream.

But a routine blood test picked up something that sparked concern.

"My PSA (prostate specific antigen) was about five," Stan, 72, says. "The doctor didn't like it, so she asked me to repeat the test a week later. It went up again."

That triggered a referral to a urologist and ultimately a prostate cancer diagnosis.

"I didn't have any of the typical symptoms — going to the toilet all the time or anything like that," Stan says.

Urologic oncologist Professor Nathan Lawrentschuk says Stan's experience is common, with many prostate cancers diagnosed in men who have no symptoms.

"Most men are surprised when they're diagnosed because they feel fine," Prof Lawrentschuk says.

Prostate Cancer Foundation of Australia head of telenursing and supportive care programs Bernie Riley says prostate cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer, accounting for about 17 per cent of all cancers in adults and 30 per cent of cancers in men.

### Understanding changes

The prostate is a gland below the bladder that helps produce semen and can influence urine flow in males, according to the government's Healthdirect website.

Benign prostatic hypertrophy, a non-cancerous enlargement of the prostate, becomes more common with age, affecting about half of men in their 50s and 80 per cent in their 80s. It is often managed with lifestyle tweaks or medication.

Bernie says that while urinary changes are common, they shouldn't be ignored.

"See your GP if they are persistent or affecting sleep, daily activities or quality of life," he says.

### Modern screening

The digital rectal examination is no longer routinely used to help detect prostate cancer in men without symptoms.

"Now, a simple PSA blood test is the primary tool used in Australia for the early detection of prostate cancer,"

Bernie says.

If PSA levels are higher than expected, doctors may repeat the test and arrange an MRI scan to help identify suspicious areas and determine if a biopsy is needed.

Prof Lawrentschuk says screening is generally recommended from around age 50, or earlier for men with a family history.

### New era in treatment

Prostate cancer treatment depends on how aggressive the cancer is and whether it has spread.

Prof Lawrentschuk says many men diagnosed with low-risk prostate cancer may not need immediate treatment — instead, the cancer may be monitored closely rather than treated straight away with surgery or radiation.

"It's called active surveillance and involves a blood test every six months, an MRI every three years and occasionally a repeat biopsy to make sure it hasn't changed into a more aggressive cancer."

In some localised, aggressive cases, modern treatments such as focal therapy, which targets cancer while sparing healthy tissue, may help reduce the side effects associated with more radical therapies.

Prof Lawrentschuk adds the goal is not just survival but maintaining quality of life.

"If we can treat prostate cancer early, we can prevent it from spreading and causing problems later," Prof Lawrentschuk says.

Following his diagnosis, Stan had low-dose-rate brachytherapy, where tiny radioactive seeds are implanted in the prostate to deliver targeted radiation to cancer cells.

His PSA levels are now low and he's grateful for the time he's enjoying with his grandchildren, Winnie and Stan Junior.

His advice to others is simple: Stay on top of your health and don't ignore check-ups.

"Men are quite stupid sometimes. They think if they stick their head in the sand, it'll go away," Stan says.

"Well, it never does. Men need to have PSA checks and be proactive about their health."

*"Men are quite stupid sometimes. They think if they stick their head in the sand, it'll go away. Well, it never does."*

**Stan Soutaris,**  
prostate cancer survivor