What to Know About Spotting the Early Signs of Testicular Cancer

by ALISON RICHARDS

How to Check for Testicular Cancer

Testicular cancer is the most common cancer in men between the ages of 15 and 35. It can also be found in older men but it is less likely, and is actually one of the rarer cancers overall. Self-examination is vital because if the cancer is caught early then treatment is highly effective. Some men experience no symptoms of testicular cancer, which means that regular examinations and understanding the signs that something may be wrong is really important. Here you will learn how to check for testicular cancer so you can be aware of the warning signs.

What is Testicular Cancer?

Testicular cancer occurs when cells grow out of control within the testes. Testicles are otherwise known as testes, and are part of the male reproductive system. They are responsible for making male hormones, such as testosterone, and producing sperm, which fertilize an egg to initiate pregnancy.

Men have two testicles; each is around the size of a golf ball and live inside the scrotum under the penis. There are many different types of cell in the testicles and if they grow out of control then a diagnosis of testicular cancer is made. A doctor will examine the cells under a microscope to determine what type of testicular cancer it is.

There are different types of testicular cancer. For example, germ cell tumors (which are subclassified as seminomas and non-seminomas) and stromal tumors (subclassified as Leydig cell tumors and Sertoli cell tumors).

Secondary testicular cancer occurs when cancer cells travel from elsewhere in the body, such as the lung, skin, prostate, and kidneys. Also, a lymphoma or leukemia might travel to the testicles. These are not testicular cancers, strictly speaking, because they did not originate there, and treatment will be dictated by the original cancer site.

What Causes Testicular Cancer?

The cause of testicular cancer is unknown but there are some risk factors that may make the development more likely.

An undescended testicle, where the testicle has not descended into the scrotum before birth, is one risk factor. An abnormal testicle, as a result of a medical condition such as Klinefelter syndrome, could increase the risk of testicular cancer.

Age is a factor, as younger men are more likely to be diagnosed compared to older men. If you have a family history of testicular cancer then your own risk is increased, and it is more likely to occur in white, non-Hispanic men rather than Black or Asian-American men.

Another risk factor is an HIT infection. Finally, taller men have an increased likelihood of getting testicular cancer, although body weight itself is not a factor.

What Are the Early Symptoms of Testicular Cancer?

The early symptoms of testicular cancer include the following:

- An enlarged testicle, or lump in either testicle, which could be painless.
- A heavy feeling, firmness, pain or discomfort in the scrotum, even if it is sporadic.
- A fluid build-up in the scrotum which has occurred suddenly.
- Back pain.
- A mismatch in the appearance between testicles.
- Tender or enlarged breasts or nipples.
- Dull aching in the lower belly or groin.
- Numbness in one of the testicles.

When Should You Seek Medical Help?

It's important to understand that most lumps and swellings in the testicles are not cancer. However, if you experience any of the symptoms above then you should see your doctor immediately to rule out anything nasty. It's quite common to get harmless cysts in the epididymis, the tube which carries sperm. A hernia can have similar symptoms to testicular cancer, or it could be a simple, treatable infection.

If you are not comfortable seeing your usual doctor, then a sexual health clinic will also be able to advise you on any symptoms you experience.

If you do have testicular cancer, then early treatment will give you a better prognosis.

What Are the Steps for Self-Examination?

If you check your testicles regularly then you will get to know them and be able to spot any differences quickly.

The ideal time for self-examination is when you are in the shower or bath, or just after, as the scrotal skin will be relaxed.

Step 1: Cup your scrotum in the palm of your hand and hold your penis out of the way.

Step 2: Use your fingers and thumbs to feel around for any lumps, enlargement, or differences between the testicles. Lumps could be as small as a grain of rice or a pea.

Step 3: Check the epididymis, a tube at the back of the top of your scrotum. It's normal for this to feel tender and it is a normal lump.

Testicles are usually different sizes and the best thing to do is examine yourself monthly to get to know your body. You'll notice changes more easily then and be able to get them checked by a doctor.

What Are the Red Flags When Checking for Testicular Cancer?

Red flags include lumps and changes in size or shape of the testicles. Anything out of the ordinary could be a sign of testicular cancer and you will only know for certain if you see a doctor. They will be able to rule out benign lumps, or reassure you if your symptoms are nothing to worry about.

Don't forget, the earlier testicular cancer is diagnosed, the more likely it is to be cured completely.