Can Testicular Cancer Be Found Early?

Most cases of testicular cancer can be found at an early stage. In some cases, early testicular cancers cause symptoms that lead men to seek medical attention. Most of the time a lump on the testicle is the first sign. Unfortunately, however, some testicular cancers may not cause symptoms until after reaching an advanced stage.

Most doctors agree that examining a man’s testicles should be part of a general physical exam. The American Cancer Society (ACS) recommends a testicular exam as part of a routine cancer-related checkup.

The ACS advises men to be aware of testicular cancer and to seek prompt medical evaluation if a mass is found. Because regular testicular self-exams have not been studied enough to show a reduction in the death rate from this cancer, the ACS does not recommend regular testicular self-exams for men without specific testicular cancer risk factors.

However, some doctors think that noticing masses promptly is an important factor in seeking early treatment, and they recommend that all men perform monthly testicular self-exams after puberty.

The choice of whether to perform a monthly self-exam should be made by each man, so instructions for testicular examination are included in this section. If you have certain risk factors that increase your chance of developing testicular cancer (such as cryptorchidism, previous germ cell tumor in one testicle, or a family history), you should seriously consider monthly self-exams and discuss this issue with your doctor.

The best time to perform the self-exam is during or after a bath or shower, when the skin of the scrotum is relaxed. To perform a testicular self-exam:

- Hold the penis out of the way and examine each testicle separately.
- Hold the testicle between the thumbs and fingers with both hands and roll it gently between the fingers.
- Look and feel for any hard lumps or nodules (smooth rounded masses) or any change in the size, shape, or consistency of the testes.

You should be aware that each normal testis has an epididymis, which appears as a small "bump"
on the upper or middle outer side of the testis. Normal testicles also contain blood vessels, supporting tissues, and tubes that conduct sperm. Some men may confuse these with cancer. If you have any doubts, ask your doctor. Sometimes, the testicle can be enlarged because fluid has collected around it. This is called a hydrocele. Other times, the veins in the testicle can dilate and cause enlargement and lumpiness around the testicle. This is called a varicocele. To be sure you have one of these conditions and not a tumor, you need to have a doctor examine you. The doctor may order an ultrasound exam (see below). This is an easy and painless way of deciding if there is a tumor.

If you choose to examine your testicles, you will become familiar with what is normal and what is different.

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