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Prostate cancer hope: Major scientific advances mean UK could start breast cancer-style national screening scheme in just THREE years, expert says

- At present there is no national screening programme for prostate cancer
- But Ros Eeles, of the Institute of Cancer Research, hopes that will change
- She hailed technological advances in the fields of genetics and imaging

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Britain could start screening middle-aged men for prostate cancer within three to five years, it was claimed today.

One of the UK's leading experts on the disease said technological advances mean a national breast cancer-style strategy may finally be possible.

At present there is no national screening programme for the disease, Britain's third deadliest cancer.

But Professor Ros Eeles, a world-leading voice in the field of oncogenetics based at the Institute of Cancer Research, hopes that will change.

Around 50,000 men in the UK are told they have prostate cancer each year and one in eight will be diagnosed in their lifetime.

Professor Eeles argued more data is needed before the UK commits to any strategy, but hailed advances in both genetics and imaging.

She said: 'We're probably looking at getting close to a tailored screening programme in the next three to five years.' At the moment men usually only find out they have prostate cancer when they start displaying symptoms – usually when they start finding it difficult to urinate or get a hot burning sensation.

They then request a 'PSA' blood test from their GP, which they are eligible for over the age of 50.

But this is far from accurate, missing many aggressive cancers and picking up too many cancers that would not cause problems if they had not been detected.

Because of this PSA levels have never been deemed accurate enough for a screening programme.

Experts say this is the key reason that annual prostate cancer deaths are still on the rise and now kills 12,000 men in the UK a year.

On the other hand breast cancer – which has had a screening programme since Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister – has seen deaths drop.

WHAT IS PROSTATE CANCER?

How many people does it kill?

More than 11,800 men a year - or one every 45 minutes - are killed by the disease in Britain, compared with about 11,400 women dying of breast cancer.

It means prostate cancer is behind only lung and bowel in terms of how many people it kills in Britain.

In the US, the disease kills 26,000 men each year.

Despite this, it receives less than half the research funding of breast cancer and treatments for the disease are trailing at least a decade behind.

How quickly does it develop?

Prostate cancer usually develops slowly, so there may be no signs someone has it for many years, according to the [NHS](#).

If the cancer is at an early stage and not causing symptoms, a policy of 'watchful waiting' or 'active surveillance' may be adopted.

Some patients can be cured if the disease is treated in the early stages.

But if it diagnosed at a later stage, when it has spread, then it becomes terminal and treatment revolves around relieving symptoms.

Thousands of men are put off seeking a diagnosis because of the known side effects from treatment, including erectile dysfunction.

Tests and treatment

Tests for prostate cancer are haphazard, with accurate tools only just beginning to emerge.

There is no national prostate screening programme as for years the tests have been too inaccurate.

Doctors struggle to distinguish between aggressive and less serious tumours, making it hard to decide on treatment.

Men over 50 are eligible for a 'PSA' blood test which gives doctors a rough idea of whether a patient is at risk.

But it is unreliable. Patients who get a positive result are usually given a biopsy which is also not foolproof.

Scientists are unsure as to what causes prostate cancer, but age, obesity and a lack of exercise are known risks.

Anyone with any concerns can speak to Prostate Cancer UK's specialist nurses on 0800 074 8383 or visit prostatecanceruk.org