

YOUR GOOD HEALTH

Genetic gamble

Tests can be lifesavers for men with family history of prostate cancer

By Encarnacion Pyle
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Even though his father, an older brother and one of his dad's relatives all had developed prostate cancer, David Hissong didn't worry that he would hear the same diagnosis.

"I knew very little about it except that it was an old man's disease," he said.

But when Hissong, 81, of Mansfield, discovered during a routine test in 2014 that he had cancer, he didn't hesitate.

"I wanted it out and decided on surgery, knowing I could fall back on chemotherapy or radiation if the cancer returned," he said.

After skin disease, prostate cancer is the most common cancer among men in the United States, affecting 1 in 6. It also is the second-leading cause of death from cancer among men.

Nearly 3 million men in the United States currently live with prostate cancer, with a new case occurring every 2.4 minutes and a death occurring every 19.1 minutes.

The prostate, which lies just below the bladder, makes fluid that forms part of semen.

While some prostate cancers grow and spread quickly, most grow slowly. Autopsy studies show that many men who die of other causes had prostate cancer that never affected them during their lives.

Robert Pilarski, a genetic counselor at Ohio State University's Wexner Medical Center, said family history is the strongest risk factor.

A man with a close relative who has prostate cancer — a father or brother, for example — is twice as

likely to develop prostate cancer as a man with no family history of the disease. If two close male relatives are affected, such as Hissong's, the risk of developing prostate cancer increases five-fold.

Prostate cancer has no early warning signs. But a test that involves a digital rectal exam and a blood test can help identify cancer early on, when treatment is most effective, says Dr. Ronney Abaza, a urologic surgeon at OhioHealth.

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Yet, PSA blood tests are controversial, and doctors say men — especially those older than 70 — should discuss the pros and cons with their physicians. These tests measure the amount of a protein known as prostate-specific antigen in blood. Elevated levels sometimes signal prostate cancer. Often, however, the test incorrectly suggests there is cancer.

These "false-positives" can cause anxiety and lead to unneeded additional tests, treatments or surgery, the U.S. Preventative Services Task Force concluded in 2012.

Because of the concerns that have been raised, Abaza worries that too few men are getting screened.

A recent study suggests that the number of new cases of advanced prostate cancer in the United States has soared by about 72 per-



Ohio residents David Hissong, 81, right, and his son Brad, 58, were both diagnosed with prostate cancer in 2014.

BARBARA J. PERENIC/THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

cent in the past decade. The study prompted researchers to question if the confusion about whether men should get tested is contributing to the rise. But not all experts agree with the findings.

Still, Abaza said PSA tests are crucial for people at high risk, including black men or those with family histories of prostate cancer. "We want to capture those cases that are life threatening," he said.

Hissong and his 58-year-old son Brad credit the test for saving their lives.

Brad Hissong said he learned he had prostate cancer two years ago, after getting a full checkup, including a PSA test. A biopsy later showed the cancer had spread to several of his lymph nodes.

"Of course I was a little worried, but I had just watched my father go through robotic surgery, and it seemed pretty straightforward and simple," he said.

Like his father, Brad Hissong also chose robotic surgery, which proponents say carries less risk of complications, has a quicker recovery period and leaves patients with minimal scarring, blood loss and pain compared to traditional surgery. The two men also underwent eight weeks of radiation afterward.

Both said they were back to the activities they love, including fishing and golfing, in no time. They've also encouraged all the other men in their family, including Brad's younger brother, Bruce, to get tested.

"It's something to be taken seriously, especially in families like ours," Brad Hissong said.

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