

# About Penile Cancer - A Quick Guide



## Contents

This is a brief summary of the information on 'About penile cancer' from CancerHelp UK. You will find more detailed information on the website.

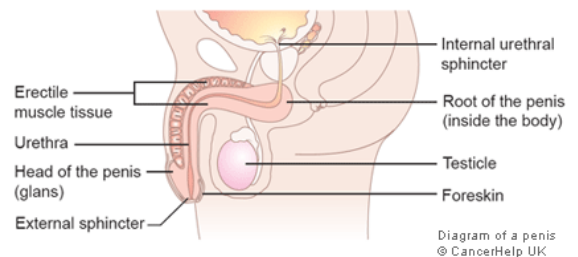
In this information there are sections on

- The penis
- Risks and causes of penile cancer
- Screening for penile cancer
- Symptoms of penile cancer
- Types of penile cancer
- Should I see a specialist in penile cancer?
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## The penis

The penis is the male sex organ. It contains a tube called the urethra, which carries semen (sperm) and urine to the outside of the body. So the penis is part of the reproductive system and the urinary system.

The base of the penis is actually inside the body and is called the root. The main part of the penis is called the body, or shaft. The tip of the penis is called the head or glans, and is covered by a moveable layer of skin called the foreskin. Some men have an operation called a circumcision to remove their foreskin.



When sexually aroused, blood flow to the penis increases. Columns of special muscle tissue in the main body of the penis (erectile tissue) fill up with blood, and this makes the penis erect.

## Cancer of the penis

Cancer can develop anywhere on the penis but most commonly develops

- Under the foreskin in men who haven't been circumcised
- On the head of the penis (glans)

## Lymph nodes

Lymph nodes are small, bean shaped glands that make up part of the lymphatic system. They are also called lymph glands. If cancer cells break away from a tumour, the first places they usually reach are nearby lymph nodes. You might have some of the lymph nodes around your penis removed during surgery.



## Risks and causes of penile cancer

Penile cancer is a rare cancer in Western countries including the UK. We don't know exactly what causes penile cancer. But there are some known risk factors.

### Main risk factors

As with many cancers, it is more common in older people - most cases are in men over 60. You have an increased risk if your father had penile cancer, but as it is such a rare condition, this is still a very small risk.

Genital wart infection (HPV) increases penile cancer risk. Around 5 out of 10 men with penile cancer have HPV infection.

### Other risk factors

Other risk factors include smoking and having a weakened immune system. Factors that lower risk include being circumcised and taking care over personal hygiene.

### Screening for penile cancer

Screening means testing for early stages of a disease before there are any symptoms. Before doctors can screen for any type of cancer, they must have an accurate test to use. The test must be reliable in finding cancers that are there. But it must also not test positive in people who don't have cancer. At the moment, we don't have a test that is reliable in picking up early cancers of the penis.

There is no screening programme for penile cancer in the UK at the moment because

- Low number of cancers would be found
- There would be high costs involved
- The tests have risks that outweigh the benefits for the majority of people

If you think you may be at higher than average risk of penile cancer, for example if you have a medical condition that increases your risk, talk to your doctor. You may be able to have check ups from time to time.

### Symptoms of penile cancer

It is important to be aware of what is normal for you and report any changes to your doctor. Penile cancer symptoms may include

- A growth or sore on the penis that doesn't heal within 4 weeks - it can look like a wart, ulcer or blister and is not always painful
- Bleeding from the penis or from under the foreskin
- A foul smelling discharge
- Difficulty in drawing back the foreskin (phimosis)
- A rash on the penis
- A change in the colour of the penis or foreskin

These symptoms do not always mean you have penile cancer. They may be symptoms of other medical conditions, such as sexually transmitted diseases.

If you have advanced penile cancer you may have other symptoms including swollen lymph nodes in your groin, tiredness, pain in your stomach or bones and weight loss.

Men are often embarrassed or frightened by symptoms and may put off going to their doctor until their cancer is more advanced. It is important to report any symptoms to your doctor straight away.

### Types of penile cancer

The penis is made of several different types of body tissues. The type of penile cancer



you have depends on the type of cell the cancer developed from. To find this out, your doctor will take a tissue sample (biopsy) and send it to a laboratory.

### **Squamous cell cancer of the penis**

Over 9 out of 10 penile cancers (90%) are this type. Squamous cells are the flat, skin like cells that cover the surface of the penis. Squamous cell cancers can develop anywhere on the penis, but the most common sites are the head of the penis (glans) and the foreskin (in uncircumcised men). This type of cancer usually grows slowly over many years. Squamous cell cancers that are found early are usually curable. Before squamous cell cancer develops, the cells may go through pre cancerous changes. When the cancer cells are only in the surface layer of the penis they are called carcinoma in situ (CIS) or penile intraepithelial neoplasia (PIN).

Verrucous carcinoma is a rare type of squamous cell penile cancer that looks like a large wart. It is a slow growing tumour that rarely spreads to other parts of the body.

### **Other types of penile cancer**

Adenocarcinoma means that the cancer started in the glandular cells that produce sweat in the skin of the penis. About 5 in 100 penile cancers (5%) are adenocarcinomas. Melanoma, basal cell carcinoma and sarcoma are even rarer types of penile cancer.

### **Should I see a specialist in penile cancer?**

It can be very difficult for GPs to decide who may have a suspected cancer and who has something more minor. But there are particular symptoms that mean your GP

should refer you to a specialist straight away.

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) have produced guidelines for GPs to help them decide which patients need to be seen urgently by a specialist.

The NICE referral guidelines state that GPs should refer any man with symptoms of penile cancer to a specialist urgently. According to Department of Health guidelines, you should ideally get an appointment within 2 weeks for an urgent referral.

### **If you are still worried**

If you are concerned that your GP is not taking your symptoms as seriously as you think he or she should, you could take this PDF along to your appointment. Ask your GP to talk it through with you and then you may be able to decide together whether you need to see a specialist.

### **What to ask your doctor about penile cancer**

- How do I know if I have cancer of the penis?
- What increases my risk of getting penis cancer?
- Can I be screened for penile cancer?
- Should I give up smoking?
- What are the symptoms of penile cancer?
- What type of penile cancer do I have?
- My father had penile cancer - does this mean I am more likely to get it?



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## Notes

### More information

For more information about penile cancer, visit our website  
<http://cancerhelp.cancerresearchuk.org>

You will find a wide range of detailed, up to date information for people affected by cancer, including a clinical trials database that you can search for cancer trials in the UK. You can view or print the information in a larger size if you need to.

For answers to your questions about cancer call our Cancer Information Nurses on **0808 800 4040** 9am till 5pm Monday to Friday

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Adapted from Cancer Research UK's Patient Information Website CancerHelp UK in January 2012. CancerHelp UK is not designed to provide medical advice or professional services and is intended to be for educational use only. The information provided through CancerHelp UK and our nurse team is not a substitute for professional care and should not be used for diagnosing or treating a health problem or disease. If you have, or suspect you may have, a health problem you should consult your doctor. © Cancer Research UK 2012. Cancer Research UK is a registered charity in England and Wales (1089464) and in Scotland (SC041666).