

Watchful waiting

Watchful waiting is a way of monitoring prostate cancer that isn't causing any symptoms or problems. The aim is to keep an eye on the cancer over the long term, and avoid treatment unless you get symptoms.

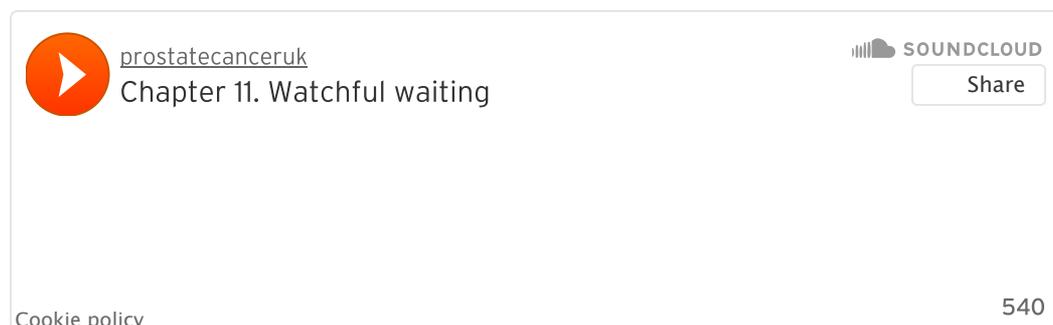
Prostate cancer is often slow growing and may not cause any problems or symptoms in your lifetime. And many treatments for prostate cancer can cause side effects. For some men these side effects may be long-term and may have a big impact on their daily lives.

If you decide to go on watchful waiting, you won't have any treatment unless you get symptoms, so you'll avoid these side effects. Many men on watchful waiting won't need any treatment for their prostate cancer. But for some men, their cancer may grow more quickly than expected.

If your cancer does grow and you start get symptoms, you can start treatment to control the cancer and help manage symptoms. Possible symptoms include problems urinating (peeing) and bone pain.

What other treatments are available?

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Chapter 11. Watchful waiting

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The difference between watchful waiting and active surveillance

Watchful waiting is often confused with **active surveillance**, which is another way of monitoring prostate cancer. The aim of both is to avoid having unnecessary treatment, but there are key differences between them.

Watchful waiting

- If you do have treatment at any point, it will usually aim to control the cancer rather than cure it.
- It's generally suitable for men with other health problems who may be less able to cope with treatments such as surgery or radiotherapy, or whose cancer may never cause problems during their lifetime.
- It usually involves fewer tests than active surveillance. These check-ups usually take place at the GP surgery rather than at the hospital.

Active surveillance

- If you decide to have treatment at any point, it will usually aim to cure the cancer.
- It is suitable for most men with cancer that is contained in the prostate (localised cancer), and who could cope with treatments such as surgery or radiotherapy if they needed it.
- It usually involves more regular hospital tests than watchful waiting, such as prostate biopsies and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans.

Watchful waiting

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Who can go on watchful waiting?

Watchful waiting may be suitable for you if your prostate cancer isn't causing any symptoms or problems, and:

- treatments may not help you to live longer
- you have other health problems which mean you might not be fit enough for treatments such as [radiotherapy](#) or [surgery](#), or
- your prostate cancer isn't likely to cause any problems during your lifetime or shorten your life.

It's also important that you've discussed other treatment options with your doctor and you're happy to go on watchful waiting.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of watchful waiting?

What may be an advantage for one person might not be for someone else. Speak to your doctor or nurse about your own situation and the things that are important to you.

Advantages

- As you won't have treatment while you're on watchful waiting, you'll avoid the side effects of treatment.
- You won't need to have regular [prostate biopsies](#).

- There are treatments available to control your cancer and manage your symptoms if you start to get symptoms. But many men won't need treatment at all.

Disadvantages

- There is a chance that the cancer may change and grow. If this happens you can start treatment such as [hormone therapy](#) to control the cancer and treat the symptoms.
- Some men may worry about their cancer growing and about getting symptoms.
- Partners and family members may worry about their loved one and find it hard to understand why they aren't having treatment.

Watchful waiting

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What does watchful waiting involve?

If you're on watchful waiting you will have tests to monitor your cancer. You won't have any treatment unless you get symptoms.

You'll normally have a [prostate specific antigen \(PSA\) blood test](#) at your GP surgery or hospital clinic every 6 to 12 months. This will help to check for any changes to your prostate cancer.

You might also have [digital rectal examinations \(DRE\)](#) and other blood and urine tests. You probably won't need to have [prostate biopsies](#). These

involve taking small pieces of prostate tissue to look at under a microscope to check for changes to your cancer.

If any changes are picked up by these tests or you have any new or different symptoms, you may be given an appointment with the doctor or nurse at the hospital.

What symptoms should I look out for?

You should let your GP or doctor or nurse at the hospital know if you notice any symptoms or changes to your health. Things to look out for include:

- any changes to your urinary habits, for example needing to urinate more often, especially at night
- problems urinating such as a weak or slow flow
- blood in your urine
- new aches and pains in your back or bones
- unexplained weight loss
- new swelling in your legs.

Ask your doctor or nurse if there are any other symptoms or changes to your health that you should look out for, as well as who to contact about them.

What happens if I get symptoms?

If you start to notice any of these symptoms you might need more tests to see if your cancer has spread, and you may be offered treatment.

The most common treatment to control the cancer and help improve symptoms is **hormone therapy**. This shrinks the cancer cells, wherever they are in the body. However, hormone therapy can also cause **side effects**.

There are also treatments available to manage specific symptoms. For example, if your prostate cancer has spread to the bones it can cause bone pain. Treatments to manage bone pain include:

- [pain-relieving drugs](#) such as paracetamol or ibuprofen, or stronger drugs such as codeine or morphine
- [radiotherapy](#) to shrink the cancer and reduce symptoms
- drugs called [bisphosphonates](#) to treat bone problems such as pain.

How prostate cancer is diagnosed

This fact sheet explains how prostate cancer is diagnosed. It describes the tests used to diagnose prostate cancer and explains what the results may show.

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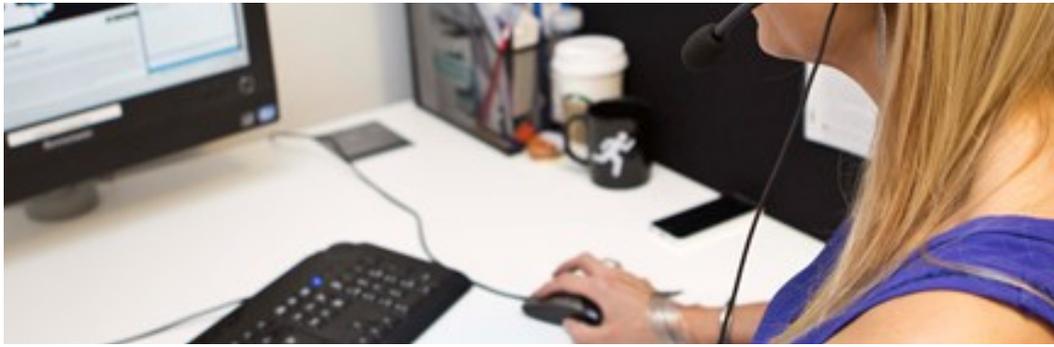
Can I have treatment instead of watchful waiting?

There will be treatment options available to you if you don't want to go on watchful waiting. These will depend on whether your cancer has spread and how quickly it might be growing, as well as any other health problems you have.

Talk to your doctor or nurse about all your options. They can explain your [test results](#) and discuss your [treatment](#) options with you. You can also speak to our [Specialist Nurses](#).

You should have all the information you need before making a decision.





Our Specialist Nurses

Ask all the questions you need answers to, or just talk. Our nurses have time for you.

[Find out more](#)

Making a decision

It's up to you whether to go on watchful waiting or have treatment – but it can be a difficult decision to make. You can discuss all your treatment options with your doctor or nurse – they'll be able to help you weigh up the pros and cons. Give yourself time to think about what is right for you. And make sure you've got all the information you need, and have the details of someone to contact if you have any questions.

You can ask for a second opinion about your treatment from a different doctor, if you want one. You don't have a legal right to a second opinion, but most doctors will be happy for you to have one and will refer you to a different doctor.

What if I change my mind?

If you're on watchful waiting but decide you want treatment, speak to your doctor or nurse. They can discuss any treatments that may be suitable for you.

Questions to ask your doctor or nurse

- Why is watchful waiting suitable for me?
- What other treatments might be suitable for me?
- What tests will I need, and how often?
- What signs and symptoms should I look out for?
- If I notice any new symptoms, who should I contact?
- When might I start to have treatment, and what would this involve?

References

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[Full list of references used to pro
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