



The British Association
of Urological Surgeons

British Association of Urological Surgeons (BAUS) and Prostate Cancer UK align on the Digital Rectal Exam (DRE) for prostate cancer – June 2025

In a joint statement, Prostate Cancer UK and the British Association of Urological Surgeons said: *“The digital rectal exam is a poor test for prostate cancer. The way that prostate cancer is diagnosed has improved vastly in recent years with the introduction of MRI scans and new biopsy techniques.*

“A clinician using their finger to feel the prostate is a legacy of the historic pathway; it does not add clinical value but can be a major deterrent to men coming forward for checks. In a cash-strapped, time-poor NHS, it makes no sense to do a test unless it could change clinical decision making.

“Our message to men is: understand your risk of prostate cancer by doing Prostate Cancer UK’s online risk checker, and if you decide to talk to your GP about testing, know that you can ask to have just a blood test. You don’t need a finger up the bum to test for prostate cancer.

“Our message to GPs is: if a man has a raised PSA result there is no need to do a physical exam – refer him for an MRI which will far more accurately identify whether or not he has cancer.

“Our message to our urology colleagues is: check your referral criteria and make sure that a rectal examination is not required for referral if the PSA level is raised.”

FAQs

1. Why are BAUS and Prostate Cancer UK putting this statement out?

- BAUS and Prostate Cancer UK agree the digital rectal exam (DRE – or “*finger up the bum*”) is a poor test for prostate cancer.
- The way that prostate cancer is diagnosed has improved vastly in recent years with the introduction of MRI scans and new biopsy techniques¹.

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coming forward for checks. In a cash-strapped, time-poor NHS, it makes no sense to do a test unless it could change clinical decision making.

- Despite this, new data shows a third of (around 750) men surveyed are still being offered a rectal exam – sometimes (3%) *instead* of a PSA blood testⁱⁱ.

2. What is a digital rectal exam (DRE)?

- A DRE, often referred to as the “*finger up the bum test*” is when the doctor inserts a gloved and lubricated finger into the patient’s back passage to feel the surface of the prostate.
- Doctors are feeling for size and irregularities on the surface of the prostate that might indicate a prostate problem.
- Any abnormalities located in the middle or front part of the prostate gland cannot be felt but they would be visible in an MRI scan.
- More information about the DRE on the Prostate Cancer UK website - <https://prostatecanceruk.org/prostate-information-and-support/prostate-tests/digital-rectal-examination-dre>

3. How is the thought of having a DRE impacting on men’s health-seeking behaviours?

- During audience research carried out by Prostate Cancer UK, it was found that in a group of more than 2,000 men, **60% were concerned about having a rectal exam**. Of those, **37% would not speak to a GP about prostate worries because they feared the DREⁱⁱⁱ**.
- In more recent research we found that **46% (456/992) of men aged 50-70 who had not checked their risk of prostate cancer thought that they needed to have a finger up the bum to get tested for prostate cancer^{iv}**. This belief is linked to lower likelihood of checking for prostate cancer risk and is one of the biggest factors preventing men from taking action.
- Published evidence also highlights the fact that the DRE is not a useful way to check for prostate cancer and that men can be referred to the hospital for further tests based on just their Prostate-Specific Antigen level being raised^{v,vi,vii}.
- This is added to the fact that current guidelines rely on men asking their GP if they want a PSA test. GPs are recommended against starting conversations about prostate cancer and PSA testing with men.



4. Why might some men not want a DRE, or the thought of having a DRE put men off speaking to their GP about prostate cancer?

- The DRE is an invasive test when the doctor inserts a gloved and lubricated finger into the patient's back passage to feel for abnormalities on the prostate.
- Some men might find the test embarrassing or there might be cultural stigmas. The deterrent may be larger in the men at higher risk of a late diagnosis — Black men report significantly more cultural stigma around the rectal examination, but face double the risk of dying from prostate cancer^{viii}
- For some men it's natural for them to feel worried or embarrassed about having tests, but some men find the idea of having a DRE upsetting. There could be many personal reasons why you might feel very upset about having this test. There's no right or wrong way to feel, and it's men's choice whether or not to have a DRE. If they do decide to have a DRE, they can explain their situation to their doctor. A doctor can talk men through the test and help to reassure.

5. My prostate cancer was found after having a finger up the bum, so why are you saying GPs shouldn't do a DRE ?

- The first step to finding early prostate cancer is a prostate-specific antigen, or PSA, blood test.
- If a man's PSA is raised, then their doctor can refer them for further investigation, usually an MRI scan.
- Men and their GP can still consider the DRE in cases where a man's PSA level is not above the level to trigger a referral, particularly in men with symptoms that might suggest a prostate problem.
- Possible symptoms of prostate problems include changes in how you wee or if it becomes painful. Erectile dysfunction and lower back/hip pain are less common possible signs too.
- If you have these symptoms, it doesn't mean you have cancer: they are also signs of other conditions. **Speak to your GP to find out what's causing them and get the right diagnosis and treatment.**

6. What if men still want a DRE, will they be able to get one?

- The first step to finding early prostate cancer is a prostate-specific antigen, or PSA, blood test.
- If a man's PSA is raised, then their doctor can refer them for further investigation, usually an MRI scan.
- If men want a DRE after having a PSA test they can still request this from their doctor.
- If your PSA level is not above the level for your GP to refer you for further tests, they might offer you a DRE as well; especially if you have symptoms that might be signs of a prostate problem.

7. Where should men go to if they want more information?

- Men can use our online Risk Checker - <https://prostatecanceruk.org/risk>
- They can contact the Prostate Cancer UK Risk Information Service – 0800 448 0821 <https://prostatecanceruk.org/prostate-information-and-support/get-support/risk-information-service>
- Or, they can speak to one of the Prostate Cancer UK Specialist Nurses - <https://prostatecanceruk.org/nurses>

References

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