

25 Years of Cancer Information Service at the German Cancer Research Center

What men ask:

Help to take decisions is much needed when it comes to prostate cancer: When is a PSA test useful? Which cancer needs to be treated? Which treatment method is suitable, from both a medical and a personal perspective?

At only about one third of all inquiries, men use the Cancer Information Service (KID) much less frequently than women. When they turn to the service, the predominant topic is prostate cancer. Ten percent of all inquiries at the Cancer Information Service deal with this disease, which, at 26 percent of cancer cases, is by now the most common cancer in men. Over 64,000 new cases of prostate cancer are diagnosed each year in Germany.

“But the great need for information about the topic of prostate cancer is not only due to the incidence of this disease,” says Dr. Petra Laibach-Kühner, who has been responsible for scientific research on the topic of prostate cancer at KID for many years now. “There is hardly a cancer which demands so many grave decisions from those affected. By the way, it is also often worried partners of affected men who turn to us with questions.”

Starting at around age 40, men are informed by their doctors about the PSA test, a blood examination to determine the level of prostate-specific antigen. If this level is elevated, there is a suspicion of prostate cancer. Blood controls and further examinations are necessary or even removal of a tissue sample from the prostate, which, however, does not always contain tumor cells. “A situation which is not uncommon and which is a heavy mental burden. All you can do then is wait and have further PSA tests and, quite frequently, also repeated tissue biopsies,” says KID expert Laibach-Kühner, describing men’s situation.

However, if a tissue sample delivers a secure tumor diagnosis, men are faced with the next question: Treatment or watchful waiting (active surveillance)? If treatment – what kind? Is it a relatively benign type of cancer, which will never cause problems and does not need to be treated, or is it an aggressively growing type of cancer?

If medical criteria such as tumor spread, tissue examination along with age and general health status of the affected indicate that the cancer should be treated, it is often not easy to choose a treatment method. For prostate cancer in its early stages, in particular, there are several treatment options with almost equal results; their advantages and disadvantages need to be weighed against each other, taking account of both medical and personal aspects.

“What we have noticed about prostate cancer in particular is that men turn to us in a very early phase of the disease. Sometimes even if there is only a suspicion of cancer because the PSA level is elevated,” says Petra Laibach-Kühner. “Affected men ask very detailed questions today, they are well informed and turn to KID because they need help to take a

decision. When it comes to deciding between surgery and radiotherapy, it is often about topics associated with fear and shame such as impotence and incontinence.”

Ideally, men should know what may be in store for them before they even decide to take a PSA test for early detection of prostate cancer. The Cancer Information Service can already help with these thoughts. For those who do not wish to make a call or write an e-mail, the Cancer Information Service provides detailed information on the Internet at www.krebsinformationsdienst.de.

The German Cancer Research Center (Deutsches Krebsforschungszentrum, DKFZ), employing over 2,500 staff members, is the largest biomedical research institute in Germany. More than 1,000 scientists are working to investigate the mechanisms of cancer development, identify cancer risk factors and develop new strategies for better cancer prevention, more precise diagnosis and effective treatment of cancer patients. In addition, the staff of the Cancer Information Service (KID) provides information about this widespread disease for patients, their families, and the general public. DKFZ is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (90%) and the State of Baden-Wuerttemberg (10%) and is a member of the Helmholtz Association of National Research Centers.

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