

Don't Let Embarrassment Hold You Back: Seeking Help for Benign Prostate Hyperplasia

Prostate health can be a sensitive topic for men to discuss. Many people assume that health concerns around the prostate automatically means cancer, but this is not the case. Benign prostate hyperplasia (BPH) is a non-cancerous condition that commonly affects men over the age of 50.¹ While the symptoms of BPH can be quite bothersome, BPH is treatable and quite manageable with simple lifestyle adjustments. The symptoms most men experience are due to a completely normal process associated with ageing. Seeking medical advice early on can help alleviate the symptoms and prevent future complications.

What is BPH?

BPH is just the medical term for the non-cancerous enlargement of the prostate gland.¹ As men age, the number of cells in the prostate can increase, making the prostate grow bigger.^{2,3} This growth can squeeze the urethra and restrict the flow of urine, causing many of the symptoms associated with BPH.¹

How common is BPH?

In 2019, there were an estimated 94 million cases of BPH worldwide, with over a million cases right here in the UK.⁴ The highest number of cases occur in men between the ages of 60-80, but BPH can occur starting as early as 40 years.⁴ Estimates show that up to half of men will have BPH by the age of 60, and by age 90, BPH will affect 80% of men.⁴

Even if it can be challenging to discuss, no man is alone when it comes to BPH.

What causes BPH?

The prostate is a small gland, about the size of a walnut, located just below the bladder and surrounding the urethra (see diagram).^{1,2,5} The primary function of the prostate is to produce a fluid which mixes with sperm cells to form semen.⁵

As men age, the prostate starts to grow.⁵ The exact reason for this growth is unknown, but it is thought to be linked to changes in hormone levels during the ageing process.^{1,3} While prostate growth is normal, it can start to put pressure on the urethra and cause many of the symptoms of BPH.¹

While age is the primary factor linked to BPH, there are also several lifestyle factors that can increase the likelihood of developing BPH symptoms.³ Increased body weight has been associated with larger prostate size.⁶ More physical activity has been consistently linked with decreased risk of BPH and other urinary disorders.⁶ There are inconsistent links with diet, but in

general, a healthy lifestyle with good nutrition and exercise may help lower the risk of developing BPH.⁶

What are the symptoms of BPH?

As the prostate grows, it can put pressure on the urethra, leading to many symptoms directly linked to urination. These can include:^{1-3,5}

- Frequent urination
- Frequent urination during the night (known as nocturia)
- Sudden need to rush to the toilet (referred to as urgency)
- Difficulty starting to urinate
- Weak flow
- Difficulty in fully emptying the bladder (called incomplete voiding)
- Leaking (known as urinary incontinence)

When should I talk to my doctor?

If you are experiencing any of the symptoms listed above, you should speak to your GP. While BPH is the most likely cause for your symptoms, it is important to rule out cancer or other serious conditions. The symptoms of BPH are highly treatable and seeking medical attention sooner can relieve you of the bothersome symptoms and avoid future complications.

Serious complications of BPH are rare, but the symptoms are quite unpleasant and can increase risk of urinary tract infections or acute urinary retention (the inability to urinate).¹ So even if your symptoms are mild, talk to your GP just to be sure.

If you notice blood in your urine, seek medical attention immediately.

How will my doctor know it's BPH?

Many of the examinations can be done by your regular GP, but you might also be referred to a specialist such as a urologist or a specialist nurse.

In addition to a physical examination, your doctor may ask you to fill in a bladder diary. Bladder diaries help track how much you drink, how much urine you pass, and how often you urinate. (Click [here](#) for an example bladder diary)

You might also be asked to fill in an IPSS questionnaire - the International Prostate Symptom score helps your doctor understand your symptoms and how they impact your life.²

Urine and blood tests might be ordered to fully check out your blood count and kidney function.² You may hear reference to something called 'PSA'; this stands for Prostate Specific Antigen, levels of which can increase if you have prostate cancer.²

You may also need to undergo some non-invasive imaging tests such as an ultrasound, MRI, or CT scan.²

For more information on the diagnosis of BPH, refer to the [NHS website](#).

What are the treatment options for BPH?

Your treatment plan for BPH will depend on the severity of your symptoms.

Mild symptoms can typically be managed with simple lifestyle adjustments. Drinking less alcohol, caffeine and fizzy drinks as well as limiting consumption of artificial sweeteners can help.^{1,7} Exercising more regularly and eating more fibre are also recommended.^{1,7} Drinking less in the evening can help manage episodes of nocturia.⁷ There are several bladder training exercises which can help strengthen pelvic floor muscles and help you regain control.⁷

More moderate symptoms may require medication. Your doctor will decide if medication is right for you to help reduce the size of the prostate or relax your bladder.^{1,7}

The majority of men with urinary symptoms do not require surgery. In rare cases, if medication and lifestyle adjustments are not managing symptoms, your doctor may suggest surgery.^{1,2,7}

For more information on treatment for BPH, including surgical options, refer to the [NHS website](#).

How will BPH affect my day-to-day life?

The symptoms of BPH can severely disrupt your daily life.³ Urgent needs to rush to the toilet, accidental leaking, getting up several times during the night - all can heavily impact your physical and mental well-being. Thankfully, BPH is a manageable condition.

Adjustments to eating and drinking habits, medication, creating a urinary schedule and bladder training exercises can help get BPH symptoms under control.⁷

Even if the symptoms are well-managed, BPH can cause stress and anxiety over having an accident, especially in public situations. Additionally, in the rare case that surgery is required, you may experience some incontinence during the recovery period.

The use of incontinence products (such as disposable or reusable pads or sheaths) can help protect against accidental leaks.⁷ However, it's important not to use these products as a coping

mechanism to avoid seeking help. If you are experiencing incontinence, it's important that you discuss your symptoms with a healthcare professional to investigate the underlying cause.

Summary

Benign prostate hyperplasia is a highly treatable, non-cancerous condition that occurs in most men, especially as they get older. The symptoms can be quite disruptive to daily life, with frequent rushes to the toilet or disruptions throughout the night.

Seeking medical attention, even for mild symptoms, is highly recommended as your doctor can help you manage the bothersome symptoms of BPH, rule out more serious conditions and help prevent future complications.

Lifestyle adjustments, medication and use of incontinence products can help bring BPH symptoms under control.

Prostate and urinary symptoms can be challenging to discuss, but you are not alone. Most men will experience BPH symptoms in their lifetime. So don't let embarrassment hold you back - speak to your doctor if you have any symptoms of BPH.

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