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CANCER RELATED SCREENINGS FOR MEN

According to the Cancer Association of South Africa (CANSA), colorectal and prostate cancer are among the top 5 cancers diagnosed among South African men, while skin cancer is the most common cancer impacting at least 20,000 people in South Africa each year.

Fortunately, early detection enables effective treatment and a better chance of recovery. Learn about these three cancer-related screening tests and how to prepare for them.

1. MOLE MAPPING: FOR SKIN CANCER

Mole mapping is a process where high-resolution images of skin lesions, and their location on your body, are captured to create a medical record. Lesions are any changes to your skin, including dark spots and moles.

HOW TO PREPARE

- Moisturise your skin regularly, as dry skin can be more difficult to examine.
- If you need to shave any areas, do so at least a week before your session. It's easier to examine moles without hair in the surrounding area.
- Bring previous skin cancer results with you to your appointment, if applicable.

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM SKIN MAPPING MOLES

Full-body photography is conducted using a digital dermatoscope – a camera that can take clear, magnified videos and images of your skin. The camera is usually placed on a rail that moves back and forth to scan your entire body. Once each mole is photographed, the images and the location of each are stored in a computer database.



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AFTER THE PROCEDURE

Each mole will be analysed by a dermatologist or a computer program. If no traces of skin cancer are found, the images will be compared to new images taken during your annual visit. If you are diagnosed with melanoma, your doctor may advise mole mapping every three to six months for at least two years. This may vary depending on your skin-cancer status.

2. COLONOSCOPY: FOR COLORECTAL CANCER

A colonoscopy is used to detect abnormalities in the large intestine (colon) and rectum. Abnormalities include growths, commonly known as polyps.

HOW TO PREPARE

- You'll need an empty colon before your procedure, as the doctor may miss polyps and other abnormalities if your colon is full. Before your test, you may be asked to:
- Limit drinks to clear liquids such as plain water, tea or coffee without milk, and broth.
- Avoid eating solid foods the day before your exam. You may be advised to stop eating at midnight the night before.
- Adjust your medications if you take drugs that reduce your blood's ability to clot. This is important, as taking such medication can increase the risk of bleeding during and after the procedure.

Note: Your colon needs to be emptied before the procedure, so your doctor may prescribe laxatives or perform an enema. Enema is a technique used to empty the bowels. The process involves liquid or gas being inserted into the rectum to stimulate the release of stool.

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM A COLONOSCOPY

You will be sedated and a long, thin tube called a colonoscope will be inserted into your rectum. There is usually a small video camera at the tip of the tube which allows the doctor to view the inside. A biopsy (where tissue samples are extracted for examination) is carried out during the colonoscopy.

AFTER THE PROCEDURE

The effects of the sedative may take a full day to wear off. Bloating, gas or slight bleeding after your first bowel movement after the exam may occur. Talk to your doctor if you experience excessive bleeding, abdominal pain or fever following the procedure.

3. PSA TEST: FOR PROSTATE CANCER

The prostate-specific antigen test, commonly known as a PSA test, is the leading method for prostate cancer detection. PSA is a protein produced by the prostate and is found in semen. When excess PSA is released, this usually indicates there's something wrong with the prostate.

HOW TO PREPARE

Before a PSA test, the patient should not have:

- had a prostate biopsy within the six weeks prior to the test
- exercised vigorously 48 hours before the test
- ejaculated in the previous 48 hours, as semen released during sexual activity may increase PSA levels
- had an active urinary infection recently, as this raises PSA levels for a few months

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM A PROSTATE CANCER DETECTION TEST

A doctor or nurse will draw blood from a vein, usually in your arm. This blood sample will be analysed in a lab to measure your PSA level. In older men, PSA levels of 3 ng/ml or higher are considered abnormal.

AFTER THE PROCEDURE

A high PSA result doesn't necessarily mean you have prostate cancer, as there are other reasons it could be high. And in some rare cases, cancer may present even with a low PSA level. If your PSA level is higher than it should be for your specific case, your doctor may send you to see a specialist, usually an oncologist. A prostate biopsy may be administered to help make a definitive diagnosis.

STAY INFORMED

If your doctor recommends a screening test for a serious condition such as cancer, talking to them about the benefits and risks is essential. Once you've both decided a particular test is right for you, ask these questions:

When will I receive the results?

What will help produce the most accurate results (e.g. things you should do, or avoid doing, before your examination)?

Which recommendations may be given for negative or positive results? Knowing how the process works will give you more time to do your research and mentally prepare.

The information is shared on condition that readers will make their own determination, including seeking advice from a professional. E&OE.



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