Prostatitis

If you have prostatitis, you get pain in your pelvis, groin or lower back. You may also have problems urinating. Prostatitis can affect men of any age.

This information is about chronic prostatitis. Chronic doesn't mean that a condition is severe, just that it lasts a long time. Doctors say you have chronic prostatitis if you've had symptoms for at least six months. Chronic prostatitis is sometimes called chronic pelvic pain syndrome.

Prostatitis that comes on quickly is called acute prostatitis. It can usually be treated with antibiotics.

What is chronic prostatitis?

Prostatitis means that your prostate gland is inflamed. Your prostate gland sits under your bladder, near your back passage (rectum). It makes the fluid that carries sperm when you ejaculate. However, some doctors aren't sure the pain of prostatitis comes from your prostate. They think it might come from tension in the muscles around your bladder.

For about 1 in 10 men, an infection with bacteria has caused their prostatitis. But many men have prostatitis without any sign of an infection.

Prostatitis is different from an enlarged prostate. Lots of men get an enlarged prostate as they get older, but it doesn't usually cause pain.

What are the symptoms?

You may get pain or aching around your penis, testicles, anus, pelvis or lower back. You might have difficulty urinating, need to urinate more often than usual, or need to go without much warning. Some men get pain after they have an orgasm.

If you have these symptoms, your doctor will want to check to make sure you don't have some other conditions, such as a bladder infection or prostate cancer.

What treatments work?

Drug treatments

Drugs called NSAIDs can help with pain and inflammation. Ibuprofen (Advil) is an NSAID. You can buy ibuprofen yourself, or get stronger NSAIDs from your doctor. Side effects of NSAIDs include nausea, stomach upsets and diarrhoea. Taking high doses of NSAIDs every day, for a long time, slightly increases your risk of a heart attack or a stroke. But taking them every so often for pain shouldn't put you at risk.

Paracetamol is another common painkiller you could try. Be careful not to take more than the dose on the packet, as an overdose can damage your liver.
If your prostatitis is caused by bacteria, your doctor will prescribe antibiotics. In two studies, between 7 in 10 and 9 in 10 men felt better after taking antibiotics for four weeks. But all antibiotics have side effects. You may feel sick, have heartburn or get diarrhoea. In some studies, up to 1 in 5 people got side effects.

Drugs called alpha-blockers may help men with prostatitis. Some alpha-blockers (and their brand names) are alfuzosin (Xatral), tamsulosin (Flomax) and terazosin (Hytrin). In one study, 6 in 10 men who took terazosin for 14 weeks said they had much less pain. These drugs can have side effects. You might feel dizzy or tired, or have a reduced sex drive.

Finasteride (Proscar) is a drug that shrinks the prostate gland. It helps men with an enlarged prostate to urinate more normally. It's also been tried as a treatment for prostatitis, but there's hardly any research to say whether it helps. It can cause side effects. In one study, 1 in 10 men said finasteride affected their sex life.

Allopurinol (Zyloric) is a drug that's normally used for a condition called gout. Some doctors think that chronic prostatitis might have a similar cause to gout. But there's no evidence that allopurinol works for prostatitis.

Surgery

You can have surgery to remove part or all of your prostate gland. But this is a serious operation, and can lead to bleeding, fertility problems, erection problems or incontinence. And there's no research to say it helps. Doctors don't usually recommend surgery for men with prostatitis.

Other treatments

Doctors can use microwaves to heat up your prostate. The microwaves come from a probe that's put inside your penis. You'll need a local anaesthetic to numb the area, or a general anaesthetic to make you sleep. You usually just have one treatment.

One small study found that heat treatment helped 7 in 10 men. But we need more research to know for certain whether it works. About 2 in 10 men got side effects, such as bleeding, an infection, incontinence or erection problems.

Biofeedback is a way of teaching you to relax the muscles around your bladder. An electrical device tells you how relaxed your muscles are, and eventually you learn to relax on your own. Or your doctor might suggest other ways of helping you relax or deal with stress. Some doctors think that the pain of prostatitis is caused by tension in your muscles. But there hasn't been any good research on this treatment.

A doctor can massage your prostate by putting a gloved finger inside your rectum. Some men with chronic prostatitis say it helps. But there hasn't been any good research.

Some men find that a very warm bath is soothing. You can buy Sitz baths, where the water just covers your bottom and hips, but there's no reason why you couldn't use your normal bathtub.
Other things you could try include drinking more water and urinating as soon as you need to. Some men try to avoid spicy foods, alcohol and drinks with caffeine in them (such as tea, coffee and coke). A laxative to soften your stools, such as lactulose, might help if you get pain when you go to the toilet. If you cycle, make sure you have a comfortable saddle.

What will happen to me?

Your symptoms may go away without treatment. In one study, a third of the men said their symptoms were better after about a year.

There are lots of treatments you can try for prostatitis but most of them haven't been studied very well. Prostatitis is beginning to get more attention from researchers, but there's still a lot doctors don't know about it.