

# Penile Cancer: Risk Factors



## What is a risk factor?

A risk factor is anything that may increase your chance of having a disease. Risk factors for a certain type of cancer might include tobacco use, sun exposure, family history, or many other things. The exact cause of someone's cancer may not be known. But risk factors can make it more likely for a person to get a particular cancer.

Things you should know about risk factors for cancer:

- Risk factors can increase a person's risk, but they do not always cause the disease.
- Some people with one or more risk factors never get cancer. Many people with cancer have no identified risk factors.
- Some risk factors are very well known. But there is ongoing research about risk factors for many types of cancer.

Some risk factors, such as family history, may not be in your control. But others might be things you can change. Knowing the risk factors can help you make choices that might lower your risk. For instance, smoking is a risk factor for penile cancer. You can help protect yourself by quitting smoking.

## Who is at risk for penile cancer?

Risk factors for penile cancer include:

- **Age.** The risk of penile cancer goes up with age. It's most common in people older than 50.
- **Not being circumcised.** Circumcision removes part or all of the foreskin on the penis. This can be done at birth or later on in life. Researchers say that circumcision may protect against cancer of the penis by making it easier to keep the penis clean. This seems to lower penile cancer risk if done as a newborn. It does not lower the risk if done as an adult.
- **Phimosis and smegma.** A person who is not circumcised may have foreskin on his penis that is difficult to retract or is constricted (called phimosis). This can make it very difficult to clean the penis. This, in turn, can cause a buildup of dead cells and skin (called smegma) under the foreskin and around the glans. This buildup can cause inflammation that may increase the risk for penile cancer.
- **Human papillomavirus (HPV) infection.** Certain types of HPV have been linked to penile cancer. In fact, HPV is found in about half of all penile cancers.
- **Tobacco use.** People who smoke or use other forms of tobacco are at higher risk for penile cancer than those who don't. Cancer-causing chemicals in tobacco may harm the DNA in cells in the penis. This may lead to penile cancer.
- **AIDS.** People who have AIDS may be at higher risk for penile cancer. This may be because AIDS causes a weakened immune system.
- **Ultraviolet light treatment for psoriasis.** People who have had PUVA therapy for psoriasis may have a slightly higher risk for penile cancer. PUVA treatments use psoralen medicine followed by ultraviolet light exposure. Today, people who are treated with PUVA have their genitals covered during treatment.

## What are your risk factors?

Talk with your healthcare provider about your risk factors for penile cancer. There are no screening tests for penile cancer. There's also no definite way to prevent cancer of the penis. But these may help lower your risk:

- **Practice safe sex.** This will make it less likely for you to get HPV or HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Limit your number of sexual partners.
- **Get vaccinated against HPV.** Ask your healthcare provider if this vaccine is right for you.
- **Don't smoke or use any form of tobacco.** Ask your healthcare provider for resources to help you quit.
- **Follow good personal hygiene habits.** If you have not been circumcised, pull back your foreskin and clean under it regularly.
- **Routinely check for any skin changes on your penis.** These changes might be warts, sores, ulcers, white patches, or blisters. If you notice any changes on the skin of your foreskin, glans, or shaft of your penis, see a healthcare provider right away. Don't let embarrassment keep you from seeing a provider about these issues.

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