

Penile cancer

Penile cancer is a rare type of cancer. It occurs on the skin of the penis or within the penis. It's not common and usually only affects men over the age of 50.

There are several types of penile cancer.

The most common types include:

- squamous cell penile cancer starts in the cells that cover the surface of the penis - it is the most common type of penile cancer
- carcinoma in situ (CIS) - often known as PeIN is a type of squamous cell cancer that only affects the cells in the skin of the penis
- melanoma of the penis - this is where the cancer develops in the skin cells that give the skin its colour
- adenocarcinoma - cancer that starts in the glandular cells of the penis that produce sweat

Symptoms of penile cancer

Signs of penile cancer include:

- a growth or sore on the penis that does not heal within 4 weeks
- bleeding from the penis or from under the foreskin
- a foul-smelling discharge
- thickening of the skin of the penis or foreskin that makes it difficult to draw back (phimosis)
- a change in the colour of the skin of the penis or foreskin
- a rash on the penis

Talk to your GP as soon as possible if:

- you have symptoms of penile cancer

It's unlikely the cause is penile cancer. But your GP should check them out.

Treatment is more successful with an early diagnosis.

Causes of penile cancer

The cause of penile cancer is not known. But certain risk factors can increase your chances of getting it.

They include:

- carrying the human papilloma virus (HPV) - there are more than 100 types of HPV, some types cause [genital warts - sexualwellbeing.ie](https://sexualwellbeing.ie)
- age - penile cancer is most common in men aged over 50
- [smoking](#) - chemicals found in cigarettes can damage cells in the penis and increases your risk of getting penile cancer
- having phimosis - repeated infections are linked to a higher risk of developing some types of penile cancer

Diagnosing penile cancer

Your GP will ask you about any symptoms you have. They'll also examine your penis for signs of penile cancer.

If your GP thinks you may have penile cancer, they may refer you to a specialist. This is usually a urologist. A urologist is a doctor who specialises in conditions that affect the urinary system and genitals.

The specialist will ask about your symptoms. They will check your medical history. They may also check for any physical signs of penile cancer.

You may have a [blood test](#). This is to check your general health and number of blood cells.

To confirm a diagnosis of penile cancer, you may need to have a biopsy. Your specialist will remove a small tissue sample so they can examine it under a microscope for cancerous cells.

Treating penile cancer

Treatment for penile cancer depends on the size of the affected area. It also depends on the rate at which the cancer has spread.

For example, carcinoma in situ (CIS or PeIN) is where only the skin cells of the penis are affected.

In most cases, treatment usually involves either:

- using a chemotherapy cream
- having laser surgery to remove the affected area of skin
- having surgery to remove the surface layer of skin from the head of the penis

You'll usually have a skin graft after surgery.

The main treatments for later-stage penile cancer are:

- surgery
- radiotherapy
- chemotherapy

Surgery involves removing the cancerous cells and possibly some of the surrounding tissue.

In many cases, any physical changes to your penis after an operation can be corrected with reconstructive surgery.

Skin and muscle can be taken from somewhere else in the body to recreate a working penis.

If you get an early diagnosis, your surgeon will usually be able to preserve as much penile tissue as possible.

Your doctor will also check the lymph glands in the groin. This is to see if the cancer has spread. Lymph glands are small organs that are part of the immune system.

In some cases, your doctor may need to remove the lymph glands. This is done through surgery.

Your outlook will mostly depend on how far the cancer has advanced at the time of diagnosis. This is the same of all cancers.

Preventing penile cancer

It is not always possible to prevent penile cancer. But you can reduce your chances of getting it.

To reduce your risk of penile cancer:

- get help to [quit smoking](#)
- get the [HPV vaccine](#)
- keep your penis clean

Wearing condoms during sex can help protect you against HPV. But they do not cover all the skin around your genitals, so you're not fully protected.

Penis hygiene

It's important to maintain good penis hygiene.

Pull back your foreskin gently and wash the head of your penis and inner foreskin regularly. This is to prevent bacterial and viral infections that can increase the risk of penile cancer.

Contact your GP if:

- you have sores or a rash that does not heal
- it's becoming difficult to clean under your foreskin

In these situations or if you have repeated infections, a circumcision may help you to keep your

Support services

Community Cancer Support Centres are in most local communities and provide support services for cancer patients, their families and carers.

They have a wide range of programmes and supports available including:

- counselling and psychological support
- manual lymphatic drainage
- physical activity programmes
- survivorship programmes
- complementary therapies

[Cancer support centres - cancer.ie](https://cancer.ie)

Reducing your risk of cancer

Each individual's risk of getting cancer is influenced by a wide range of factors. There are some things we cannot change like our age and genetics. But we can change things like the amount of alcohol we drink, getting more exercise and protecting our skin from the sun.

Unfortunately, because of the impact of factors that we cannot change people will get cancer. But we can all take steps to reduce our risk of cancer.

Some of the ways to reduce your risk of cancer are:

- [not smoking](#)
- [limiting how much alcohol you drink](#)
- maintaining a healthy body weight
- protecting your skin from the sun and not using sunbeds
- [healthy eating](#)
- [taking regular exercise](#) or physical activity
- breastfeeding your baby if you can
- vaccinating children against hepatitis B and [HPV](#)

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