

The challenges on the family unit faced by younger couples affected by prostate cancer: A qualitative study.

Main findings

- We looked at how prostate cancer (PCa) affected family functioning in younger couples and the challenges they faced.
- Younger couples affected by PCa felt challenged by issues relating to their parental role and the interactions within the family unit, particularly relating to discussing PCa with their child(ren), managing the impact of PCa on the family and accessing the support needed.
- Having someone within the healthcare team or informal support services who can help families address the emotional challenges they are facing may be helpful.
- Support programmes offering guidance to children/young adults affected by PCa in their family, and addressing the concerns of parents may help families to better adapt.

What we already know

The number of younger men (aged 65 and under) being diagnosed with prostate cancer is rising. A proportion of younger men affected by prostate cancer are likely to have young children (0-18 years) and/or young adult children (YA) (19-29 years). Prostate cancer and treatment side effects can cause challenges in the relationships of couples, and subsequently this may impact on the lives of their children. A parental cancer diagnosis and treatment can lead to major changes to the lives of the whole family. Little research has been conducted on fathers who have cancer, or more specifically on how prostate cancer may affect family functioning in younger couples, and what challenges it creates.

What did we do?

The Life After Prostate Cancer Diagnosis study sent surveys to men in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. A sample of men who had completed the survey, that were aged 65 and under and had indicated that they and their partner/wife would be interested in participating in a telephone interview were contacted. We interviewed men with prostate cancer and their partner/wife separately. We asked each about their experience of life following a prostate cancer diagnosis, including the impact of prostate cancer and side effects of treatment on their relationship, family life, work and finances, social activities, their experience of healthcare and the support they had received and needed.

What did we find?

- A diagnosis of PCa can cause significant disruption to the family unit and the quality of life of family members.
- How to tell their children about the PCa diagnosis was challenging for couples, particularly if the stage of cancer was advanced.
- Some parents felt their child(ren) were coping well following the diagnosis, whilst others noticed behavioural changes in their child(ren) and to the relationships between themselves and their child(ren).
- Couples who wanted more children felt particularly challenged when deciding on treatment (one of the side effects of treatment causes impotency), and felt guidance to be lacking in this area.
- Hereditary implications were of particular concern to couples who had sons.
- Many couples employed a range of various strategies to manage the impact of PCa on their family including reassuring their child(ren), carrying on their lives as normal and keeping busy.
- Different levels of support were provided within the family and externally (school, university institution, friends). However, lack of support for the children of couples who had older children were reported as an unmet need.

How will these results be used?

In this study, we found unmet support needs of younger couples in relation to their children and family lives. Having someone within the healthcare team or informal support services who can help families address the emotional challenges they are facing may be helpful. Support programmes offering guidance to children/young adults affected by PCa, addressing the concerns of parents and facilitating self-management as a family may help families to better adapt. These results will be fed back to doctors and others who provide care.