

I had yearly PSA tests but my prostate cancer still wasn't caught in time

I lost my father and uncles to the disease and wonder if urging my GP to consider my results in light of this would have made a difference



Harry Elson lost his father and uncles to prostate cancer and was aware from a young age of his increased risk of the disease. Credit: Jeff Gilbert

Harry Elson, 79, lives in Guildford with his wife, Margaret.

When my father and his brothers all died of [prostate cancer](#) in the 1990s, it was still considered an “old man’s disease” and few people really spoke about it. However, knowing my family history meant I was incredibly aware of my [increased risk of the disease](#) from a young age.

In my 50s, I began to push for [annual prostate-specific antigen \(PSA\) blood tests](#) and I encouraged all my friends to have them too. I was determined not to face the same fate as my father and his brothers. Yet sadly, even though I had yearly tests, my cancer wasn’t caught in time. I am now facing a battle against stage 4 prostate cancer and another shock came when my son Jeremy was also diagnosed with the disease.



Harry (right) with his son Jeremy, whose prostate cancer was caught at an early stage and was able to be successfully treated

My family history of cancer

Until his mid-70s, my father, John, was a fit and healthy man who enjoyed gardening and playing cricket and football. Everything changed when he suffered a slight fall and began to complain about pain in his hip. His GP put this pain down to wear and tear and my father resiliently ploughed on.

As the years went on, my father's mobility worsened, until one night, he collapsed and was admitted to hospital. That's when he received the terribly shocking news – he had advanced prostate cancer, which had silently spread to his bones, causing his pelvis to fail and his eventual collapse. Although the doctors quickly administered [radiotherapy](#) treatment, he was never to walk again, and just two weeks later, he died, at the age of 80.



Harry at home in Surrey with his wife, Margaret Credit: Jeff Gilbert

It's scary to think how little understood the disease was just 30 years ago. Part of me wonders whether my father's GP would have even been aware of the warning signs of prostate cancer. In the following years, both his brothers also died of the disease. My sister, Mary, tragically died from [ovarian cancer](#) too, aged 59. After their deaths, I had been determined to do everything I could to avoid the same fate.

Rising PSA levels

From the age of 40, I had annual health check-ups through my work and always made sure to push for a blood test so I could monitor my PSA levels. Still, this didn't feel like enough, and as the years went by, I found myself thinking about my father's death more and more.

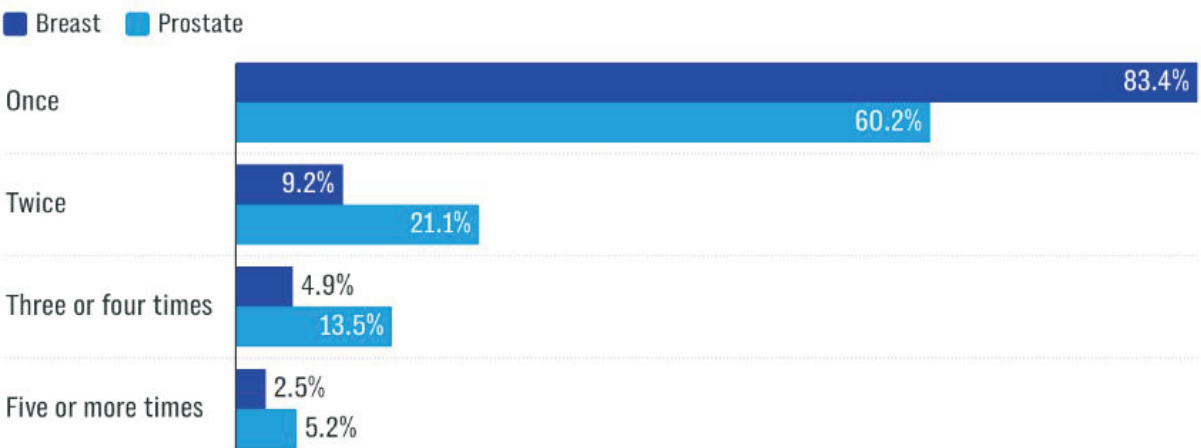
So, once I had finished work and no longer had these annual health check-ups, I went to my GP and explained my family history to them. I pushed for annual PSA tests, and although they were very resistant to the idea, my doctor finally agreed to general blood tests each year, assuring me that they would take further action if it were ever necessary. I came out of that consultation feeling incredibly reassured.

In my late 50s, my PSA level was low, at 0.8ng/mL; however, over the years, it began slowly to rise. Each time I went to the doctor for my annual blood test, the nurses questioned why I was there and tried to convince me that yearly testing wasn't necessary. Still, I refused to give in and continued to log my PSA levels year after year.

Then, at the age of 73, my PSA level jumped up to 2.6. My GP decided to investigate further with a digital rectal examination. Although he said my prostate was slightly enlarged and felt "rough" on the left side, he assured me that no further action was necessary. While a PSA level of 2.6 is higher than normal for a man in his 40s, it is considered normal for a man in his 70s.

Men with prostate cancer are being dismissed by GPs repeatedly

Number of GP visits before diagnosis with breast or prostate cancer



Before you were diagnosed, how many times did you speak to a healthcare professional at your GP practice about health problems caused by cancer? | Source: NHS

Dismissed by my GP

Hindsight is a wonderfully frustrating thing and I can't help but wonder whether my future would have been different had I urged my GP seriously to consider my results in the context of my family history.

For the next 10 months, I carried on as usual. Then, in October 2021, my wife, Margaret, and I were visiting our second home in Spain when I experienced a very uncomfortable feeling in my prostate area and began waking up in the night. These were the biggest red flags yet and I was terribly concerned. As soon as we returned home, I contacted my doctor's practice for my annual PSA test.

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When I met with the GP, he explained that my PSA reading had doubled in a year to 7.69 and that he was significantly concerned given my family history. He referred me to the hospital for immediate investigation.

[Read more about my story](#)

The awful diagnosis

In all fairness, my experience at the Royal Surrey Cancer Centre couldn't have been better. They were fantastically speedy and within a month, I had an [MRI scan](#) and a biopsy on my prostate. Then came the awful news. In February 2022, I was diagnosed with stage 4 prostate cancer. It had already spread into my bones.



Harry was diagnosed with stage 4 prostate cancer in February 2022 Credit: Jeff Gilbert

When the doctor told me, I simply didn't know how to react or what to do. All I could think was how vigilant I had been for the past 10 years and wished that I had pushed for a thorough check-up when my PSA level had jumped a year before. Perhaps my cancer would have been caught at an earlier and more manageable stage.

For a while, I simply couldn't cope and didn't want to tell anyone. We had two weeks before I began my first course of [chemotherapy](#) so Margaret and I quietly left the country for our home in Spain.

There, I locked myself away for a few days to process the diagnosis and what it meant for our future. However, Jeremy quickly knew something was up, so as soon as we returned, I fessed up to him and our other son, Gary. It was very difficult but we discussed my diagnosis openly and with gallows humour, as is the Elson way.

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Chemotherapy and hormone treatment

I can't praise the hospital enough for how quickly they started my treatment programme. That March, I began a six-session course of chemotherapy and three-monthly injections of Zoladex, a hormonal therapy drug.

Unfortunately, the side effects were unpleasant and my body began changing rather dramatically. Within a few months, I had developed a belly, my muscles had wasted away, and – without going into too much detail – my sex drive had disappeared and my organs “down there” had changed beyond recognition.

Still, I tried to remain positive. After processing my diagnosis, I realised I didn't want it to be a millstone around the neck and I continued living my life to the fullest – whether it was spending time tending to my beloved garden, making gadgets in my garage workshop, holidaying in Spain with Margaret, or going to watch Tottenham Hotspur with my sons.



After his diagnosis, Harry continued to live life to the fullest, including by holidaying to Spain with Margaret

Shortly after I began my treatment, Jeremy pushed his GP for a PSA test and discovered his levels were slightly raised, at 3.5. Luckily, aware of our family history of the disease, his GP referred him for further testing, which confirmed he had prostate cancer. We spoke and joked very openly with one another about the undignified realities of rectal examinations and prostate biopsies. In some ways, going through the experience together was rather comforting.

I'm delighted to say that Jeremy's cancer was caught at a very early stage and his treatment was successful.

What comes next?

After my course of chemotherapy, I was pleased to hear that it had been successful in keeping my cancer under control. In the years since then, I have continued with regular check-ups, daily doses of abiraterone (another type of hormone therapy tablet) and prednisolone (a corticosteroid medication), and three-monthly Zoladex implants.

Until very recently, everything had been going rather swimmingly. I remained in fairly good health and continued to stay active and enjoy our frequent visits to Spain. However, in August this year, I started my second cycle of chemotherapy, and just three days later, I developed neutropenic sepsis and was admitted to hospital. It was terribly scary and I spent two days in a state of complete delirium while I was pumped with all sorts of drugs and slipped in and out of consciousness. Once I was out the other side, Margaret explained just how lucky I was to be alive.

After two weeks of recovery and hospital treatment, I met my consultant, who explained that my nine sessions of chemotherapy would proceed as scheduled. I had multiple scans, which confirmed my PSA had continued to rise, but there has been little new cancer growth, which is a great relief. My future is uncertain but I refuse to think the worst and will continue fighting until the very end.

Inspired by my deeply frustrating experience, I wrote a book titled *Prostate: A Family Affair*, which I hope will encourage men to push for a PSA test and refuse to accept “no” for an answer if they think something is wrong. I’m donating all of the book’s profits to the Prostate Project, a charity dedicated to giving men a better chance of beating the disease.

It’s devastating to think how many men have succumbed to this disease. That’s why I’m supporting *The Telegraph*’s prostate cancer screening campaign. We need more awareness and a stringent screening programme for men at a higher risk of the disease. Early diagnosis and treatment is entirely possible – as Jeremy’s story proves.

As told to Ella Nunn

Prostate: A Family Affair by Harry Elson is available to purchase for £10 on [his website](#). All profits will be donated to the Prostate Project.

<https://noslehmpublishing.sumupstore.com/>

Prostate Cancer Research is one of four charities supported by this year’s Telegraph Christmas Charity Appeal. The others are the Motor Neurone Disease Association, Canine Partners, and The Not Forgotten. To make a donation, please visit telegraph.co.uk/appeal2025 or call [0151 317 5247](tel:01513175247).