The rectal exam

Digital rectal examination
Some people find having a rectal examination embarrassing, but it only takes a few minutes and isn't usually painful.
THE FINGER

Bladder

Rectum

Prostate
Introduction

• A rectal examination is a type of physical examination during which a doctor or nurse inserts a finger into your rectum (back passage) to feel for abnormalities.

• It's sometimes known as a digital rectal examination (DRE).
Definition of Digital rectal exam

• A digital rectal exam is an examination of the lower rectum. The doctor uses a gloved, lubricated finger to check for abnormalities
Procedure

- The **digital rectal examination** (DRE; Latin: *palpatio per anum*, PPA) is a relatively simple procedure. The patient undresses, then is placed in a position where the **anus** is accessible (lying on the side, squatting on the examination table, bent over the examination table, or lying down with feet in stirrups). During this procedure, areas which can be palpated are: the bulb of the penis, the urogenital diaphragm, the anorectal ring, and other nearby anatomical landmarks. However, structures like the **ureter** (the two tubes that run from each kidney to the urinary bladder), and the **urethra** (which, in a male, is divided into three parts, and is inside the penis) cannot be palpated.

- If the patient is lying on his side, the physician will usually have him bring one or both legs up to his chest. If the patient bends over the examination table, the physician will have him place his elbows on the table and squat down slightly. If the patient uses the supine position, the physician will ask the patient to slide down to the end of the examination table until his buttocks are positioned just beyond the end. The patient then places his feet in the stirrups.

- The physician spreads the buttocks apart and will usually examine the external area (anus and perineum) for any abnormalities such as hemorrhoids, lumps, or rashes. Then, as the patient relaxes, the physician slips a lubricated finger into the rectum through the anus and palpates the insides for a short time (from about 5 to 60 seconds).
What it's used for

WHY DO YOU NEED TO GET IT DONE?

• One of the most common reasons for having a rectal examination is if a man has a suspected problem with his prostate gland (see below), which could be a sign of prostate disease or prostate cancer.

• A rectal examination may also be needed if a person develops changes in their normal bowel habits, which could indicate a problem with their digestive system. These changes could include:
  • bleeding from your rectum
  • constipation
  • loss of normal bowel function, also called bowel incontinence (and occasionally urinary incontinence)
  • pain in your bottom (proctalgia)
Why It Is Done

- A digital rectal exam (DRE) is done to:
  - Check for growths in or enlargement of the prostate gland in men. A tumor in the prostate can often be felt as a hard lump. This may be done as part of a regular examination or to check on symptoms, such as a change in urination. Not all problems of the prostate can be felt through the rectum.
  - Check for problems in a woman's reproductive organs, such as the uterus and ovaries. It is often done during a regular pelvic examination and Pap test. It may also be done to check on symptoms, such as pelvic pain or vaginal bleeding.
  - Help find the cause of symptoms such as rectal bleeding (blood in the stool), belly or pelvic pain, a change in urination, or a change in bowel habits.
  - Collect a stool sample to test for blood in the stool.
  - Check for hemorrhoids or growths, such as cancer, in the rectum. DRE alone is not used to diagnose colorectal cancer. Also, a DRE may not find internal hemorrhoids because they are soft and hard to feel. A sigmoidoscopy may be needed to diagnose internal hemorrhoids.
The prostate gland

- The prostate gland is a small gland found only in men. It's located in the pelvis, between the penis and bladder, and surrounds the urethra (the tube that carries urine from the bladder to the penis).
- The prostate gland can be examined by placing a finger into the rectum. The doctor carrying out the examination will be able to feel any changes in the prostate, such as swelling and hardening.
- The prostate gland often becomes larger in older men. This can place pressure on the bladder and urethra, causing symptoms such as:
  - difficulty beginning to urinate
  - a flow of urine that's weak or stops and starts
  - having to push or strain to pass urine
  - a frequent need to urinate
  - waking up frequently during the night to urinate
- **Prostate enlargement** can be troublesome to live with, but it doesn't pose a threat to health. However, its symptoms are similar to the symptoms of prostate cancer, and a rectal examination is one way of finding out whether the symptoms are caused by prostate enlargement or prostate cancer.
- Prostate cancer can cause the surface of the prostate gland to become hard and bumpy, while prostate enlargement doesn't usually affect the surface.
How the test is performed

- The doctor will first examine the outside of the anus for hemorrhoids or fissures. Then the doctor will put on a latex glove and insert a lubricated finger into the rectum. In female patients, this exam may be done together with a pelvic exam.
What Affects the Test

• Hemorrhoids or anal fissures may cause discomfort during a digital rectal exam.
Risks

• A small amount of bleeding from the rectum may occur after an examination, especially if hemorrhoids or anal fissures are present.
USES OF DRE

- for the diagnosis of rectal tumors and other forms of cancer
- for the diagnosis of prostatic disorders, notably tumors and benign prostatic hyperplasia;
- for the diagnosis of appendicitis or other examples of an acute abdomen (i.e. acute abdominal symptoms indicating a serious underlying disease);
- for the estimation of the tonicity of the anal sphincter, which may be useful in case of fecal incontinence or neurologic diseases, including traumatic spinal cord injuries;
- in females, for gynecological palpations of internal organs
- for examination of the hardness and color of the feces (i.e. in cases of constipation, and fecal impaction);
- prior to a colonoscopy or proctoscopy.
- to evaluate hemorrhoids
- In newborns to exclude imperforate anus
How to prepare for the test:

- The doctor will ask you to try to relax before the test and to take a deep breath during the actual insertion of the finger into the rectum.
THE EXAM

• Because a part of the prostate gland can be felt through the rectum, an experienced doctor can do a digital rectal exam (DRE) and determine if there is any unusual growth or abnormality.

• A normal prostate is fairly soft and uniform. If there is prostate cancer present, depending on the stage and location, it may be hard (indurated) with lumps and nodules. If...
THE BETTER TEST?

• The **DRE** remains a cornerstone in the diagnosis of **prostate cancer**, owing to its ease, lack of cost, low risk, and contribution to detection of cancer in men with normal PSA levels.
WHAT AGE SHOULD YOU GET A RECTAL EXAM DONE

• For most men at average risk, screening is started at age 50. However, some doctors recommend that men at higher risk of prostate cancer — African-American men or men with a family history of prostate cancer — start screening earlier.

• The American Urological Association recommends a **first-time test at age 40**, with the schedule of follow-up testing to be determined on an individual basis.
POSITIVE BIOPSIES

• In more recent studies, only 26% to 34% of men with suspicious findings on DRE have positive biopsies for cancer (1,2 and 3). So unfortunately the most widely used test for the detection of prostate cancer turns out to be the most subjective. Some factors affecting the results of DRE include: examiners’ skills, varied indication for the examination, selection of patients based on symptoms and age.
• Seventy percent (70%) of men have never had a rectal exam! What? Prostate cancer: The Rodney Dangerfield of diseases...It gets no respect!

• July 3, 2011 by John McHugh M.D.

• From HealthNewsDigest.com Men’s Health
HOW OFTEN

• A routine annual DRE is recommended by the American Cancer Society, American Urological Association, and American Medical Association.
SUSPICIOUS DRE

• Therefore, a suspicious DRE should be followed by a prostate ultrasound and biopsy, unless it is clinically inappropriate, owing to overall poor patient health.
WHY DRE

• While the PSA test is a screening tool for prostate cancer, it's not always reliable. False positives and false negatives have happened with the PSA tests.

• It is also estimated that up to 25% of men with prostate cancer have low PSA's.
How It Is Done

MEN VS WOMEN

• For a digital rectal exam, you will take off your clothes below the waist. You will be given a gown to wear.

• A man is often examined while he stands, bending forward at the waist. A man can also be examined while lying on his left side, with his knees bent toward his chest.

• A woman is often examined while lying on her back on an examination table, with her feet raised and supported by stirrups. A exam is often done for women so that organs inrectovaginal the pelvic area can be checked. But a digital rectal exam also can be done with a woman lying on her left side, especially if a pelvic exam is not done at the same time.
NB:

A rectal examination isn't a guaranteed way of diagnosing prostate cancer, so it's usually used in combination with other tests, such as a blood test and a biopsy (where a small sample of the prostate gland is removed for further testing).

Prostate enlargement or benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH) is a common condition in older men. This animation explains what the prostate gland is and how it functions. It also highlights the importance of seeing your GP to check for prostate cancer.