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Some may delay prostate treatment

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Older men with early-stage prostate cancer are not taking a big risk if they keep an eye on the disease instead of treating it right away, suggests the largest study to look at this issue since PSA blood tests became popular.

Only 10 percent of the 9,000 men in the study who chose to delay or skip treatment had died of prostate cancer a decade later. The vast majority were alive without significantly worsening symptoms or had died of other causes.

Even the 30 percent who eventually sought treatment were able to delay it for an average of 11 years.

Grace Lu-Yao of Robert Wood Johnson Medical School in New Jersey led the study.

Whether to treat prostate cancer is one of the biggest medical dilemmas today. The disease is the most common cancer in American men — about 220,000 cases will be diagnosed this year — but most tumors grow so slowly they never threaten lives. There is no sure way to tell which tumors will.

PSA tests can help find tumors many years before they cause symptoms, but routine screening of men at average risk of the disease is not recommended, because there is no proof it saves lives.

Prostate-cancer treatments are tough, especially on older men. Many men are left with sexual or bladder-control problems. Some doctors instead recommend "watchful waiting" to monitor signs of the disease and treat only if they worsen.

The new study looked at the natural course of the disease in men who chose that option. It is the first involving so many older men — half were over 75 — and so many whose tumors were found through PSA tests.

Using the federal government's cancer database, researchers studied 9,018 men diagnosed from 1992-2002 with early-stage prostate cancer who did not get surgery, radiation or hormone therapy for at least six months. Most never got any treatment at all.