Ignoring health screenings a risky practice for too many minority men

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Question: I am a Caucasian woman who is dating an African American man. He is 50 years old with a family history of prostate cancer. Recently I found out that he's never been screened for prostate cancer and has no intention of doing so. When I tried to bring it up he said, "We just don’t do THAT." I asked, "Who are ‘we’ and what exactly is it that you don’t do?" to which he responded, "Brothers. We don’t do that..." and he wouldn’t say anything else. I don’t get it. Can you help me to understand his concerns? Is there anything I can say or do to help him understand why it’s important that he be screened?

Answer: Unfortunately and tragically, there are some African American males who perceive prostate screening particularly the DRE (digital rectal exam) as somehow demeaning, emasculating, and for some strange reason, an assault on their masculinity. These men are playing roulette with their health and lives when they do not participate in healthcare screenings in general for conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease as well as cancer screenings.

Reasons to get the DRE
When I've been presented with attitudes such as those you described, I've attempted to educate/inform the person about what to expect when it comes to prostate cancer screening as well as the disease itself.

The following information is some of what I share:

• The DRE gives the doctor a sense of any irregularities on the surface of the prostate. The DRE & PSA, when used together are effective screening tools physicians use in determining if someone may have prostate cancer.

• Prostate cancer if caught early has one of the highest if not the highest cancer survival rates of all cancers.

• It's the person undergoing the exam who needs to assess their feelings of identity particularly when the exam is done in private, lasts all of 5-10 seconds, and there are no sexual connotations inherent in the procedure unless the examinee imagines them.

• In choosing not to be screened for prostate cancer and the man subsequently develops prostate cancer; the cancer could spread unchecked to other organs/regions of the body. Undoubtedly, an individual’s sexual functioning will be affected but more importantly the individual may end up fighting just to live.

• It is important that prostate cancer screening be included as part of someone’s yearly physical check-up along with other screenings as indicated by family history or medical guidelines.

PSA testing

Finally, there are individuals who should consider undergoing a PSA test, which measures prostate antigens in the blood; however the DRE is often used in conjunction with the PSA to get a comprehensive picture of what's going on with the prostate gland.

Talk to the doctor

This person should speak with his physician to get the most up-to-date information on prostate screening and treatments.

I hope this helps.

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