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## **Digital Rectal Exam (DRE) [1]**

**This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board \[2\]](#), 03/2016**

A digital rectal exam (DRE) is a screening test for both men and women. It allows a doctor to check the lower rectum, pelvis, and lower belly for cancer and other health problems, including:

- Prostate cancer in men
- Rectal cancer or cancer in the lower colon of men and women
- Uterine or ovarian cancer in women, along with a vaginal examination

A doctor may perform a DRE as part of a routine medical examination. Or a person may need a DRE if he or she has symptoms such as rectal bleeding, a change in bowel habits, urethral discharge or bleeding, or a change in urine stream.

### **Who does my DRE?**

Typically, a primary care doctor or a gynecologist performs a DRE in a private exam room at the doctor's office. A gynecologist is a doctor who specializes in conditions of a woman's reproductive organs.

A nurse is often in the room with the doctor during the DRE.

## **Getting ready for a DRE**

No special preparation is needed before a DRE. However, you should tell your health care team if you have hemorrhoids or anal fissures, as the DRE may aggravate them.

Before your appointment, find out from your insurance provider what costs will be covered. And, ask if there are any additional costs you must pay yourself. When you arrive at the doctor's office, you will be asked to sign a consent form. This form states that you understand the benefits and risks of the DRE and agree to have the test. Talk with your health care team about any concerns you may have.

## **During the test**

A DRE is generally not painful and only takes a few minutes to complete. You will be asked to take off your clothes below the waist and will be given a gown to wear or a cloth to wrap around you.

For men, the doctor will ask you to either stand and bend forward at the waist or lie on your side on an exam table with your knees pulled up to your chest in the fetal position. To start the exam, the doctor will gently insert a lubricated, gloved finger into the rectum. He or she may ask you to relax and take a deep breath as the DRE begins. The doctor will then determine the size of the prostate and feel for bumps, soft or hard spots, or other abnormalities. The doctor will also examine the wall of the lower colon/rectum. If your prostate is enlarged, you may feel some discomfort or mild pain during the exam; but pain is unusual. You may also feel the need to urinate.

Women usually are examined while lying on their backs on an exam table with their feet in raised stirrups. Just as with men, the doctor may ask you to relax and take a deep breath before gently inserting a lubricated, gloved finger into the rectum. The goal is to feel the reproductive organs and the bowel. The doctor may also feel for abnormalities in the internal organs by applying pressure on the lower abdomen or pelvic area with the other hand. This may be uncomfortable but is typically not painful.

## **After the test**

You can go back to your usual activities immediately after a DRE. You may bleed slightly from the rectum afterward, particularly if you have hemorrhoids or anal fissures. Tell your doctor if you experience significant rectal bleeding.

If your doctor finds any areas of concern during the DRE, additional tests may be needed to examine them more closely.

## **Questions to ask your health care team**

Before having a DRE, consider asking the following questions:

- What will happen during the DRE?
- How long will the procedure take?
- Will it be painful?
- How accurate is a DRE at finding cancer?
- When will I learn the results of the DRE? How will they be communicated to me?
- Who will explain the results to me?
- What further tests (such as a [colonoscopy](#) [3] or [barium enema](#) [4]) will be necessary if the results suggest cancer?

## More Information

[Cancer Screening](#) [5]

[Types of Cancer](#) [6]

## Additional Resource

MedlinePlus: [Digital Rectal Exam](#) [7]

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### Links

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/diagnosing-cancer/tests-and-procedures/digital-rectal-exam-dre>

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24481>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24402>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24972>

[6] <http://www.cancer.net/cancer-types>

[7] <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/007069.htm>