

Cancer Screening Video Transcript

Meet John and Mary. They're busy juggling their life, family, and careers. Just like them, you might find it confusing when the subject of cancer screening comes up. Although both are symptom-free, John may wonder whether to get screened for prostate cancer, and Mary might have a conversation with her doctor about breast cancer screening. Often, people like John and Mary assume that all cases of a particular type of cancer will progress in the same way, that being diagnosed with breast cancer or prostate cancer automatically means suffering severe illness and this perspective, screening sounds like it's always beneficial because it will catch things early and treatment can begin immediately. In reality, screening and early diagnosis don't necessarily lead to a better two people develop the same form of cancer and succumb to their illnesses at the same time, one diagnosed early through screening, the second diagnosed only after having symptoms. It may seem that the first person lived longer thanks to screening, but, in fact, the two people developed and died from cancer at the same time. Most people don't think about potential risks associated with screening: over-diagnosis, detecting an illness that will never cause any problems, complications from additional testing like biopsy—removing tissue from the body for examination—and complications from treatments that might not be necessary. John might get screened for prostate cancer, receive a positive result, and likely undergo additional testing with a biopsy. John may experience complications from that biopsy, such as blood in his urine or rectal bleeding, only to find out that he doesn't have prostate cancer. Mary might go for breast cancer screening and could be diagnosed with the illness through a biopsy. Sometimes the cancer that is identified by screening might be life-threatening, and earlier treatment could improve Mary's chance of a good outcome. However, Mary could also find out that her cancer is a milder form that could never cause serious illness or worse. Mary may go through unnecessary treatments like radiation therapy, increasing her risk for heart disease, or have a mastectomy, surgically removing part or all of her breast which carries risk of infection. Yes, screening can sometimes be beneficial, but the potential benefits need to be balanced against the potential harms. For individuals within some age groups, screening for certain types of cancers may be appropriate because the benefits of screening outweigh the harms. For other age groups, however, screening may not be appropriate because the harms outweigh the benefits. John and Mary need to have a frank discussion with their doctors. Shared decision-making tools can help them determine whether benefits outweigh harms, or harms outweigh benefits, whether to screen or avoid screening. Like John and Mary, take advantage of the information and tools available at the Canadian Task Force on Preventive Healthcare website.