

5-Alpha-Reductase Inhibitor for Benign Prostatic Hyperplasia: A Review of Volume-Selected Therapy and Safe Prostate Cancer Detection

Enoch Chi Ngai Lim^{a, d} , Chi Eung Danforn Lim^{a, b, c} 

Abstract

Benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH) is a common cause of male lower urinary tract symptoms (LUTS). The value of 5-alpha-reductase inhibitor (5-ARI) therapy depends mainly on prostate enlargement and the risk of progression. Dutasteride, either alone or in fixed-dose combination with tamsulosin, reduces intraprostatic dihydrotestosterone, decreases prostate volume over several months, and lowers the long-term risk of AUR and BPH-related surgery in appropriately selected men. Dutasteride lowers mean prostate-specific antigen (PSA) by approximately 50% after 6 months, which can mask a rise in PSA if one is not careful. Documentation of the pre-treatment PSA, establishment of an on-treatment *nadir* or baseline, and systematic evaluation of any confirmed rise in PSA are necessary to avoid missing progression of prostate cancer. Large chemoprevention trials reduced the overall detection of prostate cancer but reported small numerical excesses of high-grade tumors, leading to regulatory warnings. Later bias-adjusted analyses, long-term follow-up, systematic reviews, and population cohorts suggest that this signal is mainly related to detection and PSA monitoring rather than to a clear increase in prostate cancer-specific mortality. This article reviews guidelines, regulatory recommendations, trials, and recent observational studies to support a practical framework: reserving dutasteride-based therapy for men with demonstrable enlargement or a high progression risk; documenting baseline PSA, digital rectal examination, and a prostate-size proxy before treatment; establishing a 6-month PSA baseline; and using a rise-from-*nadir* and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)-first diagnostic pathways when cancer is

suspected. Safe prescribing depends on appropriate patient selection and careful PSA monitoring.

Keywords: Benign prostatic hyperplasia; Dutasteride; tamsulosin; 5-alpha-reductase inhibitor; Prostate-specific antigen; Prostate volume; Prostate cancer; Multiparametric MRI

Introduction

Benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH) is clinically relevant when it causes lower urinary tract symptoms (LUTS), reduces quality of life, or increases the risk of acute urinary retention (AUR) or surgery. Contemporary European guidance recommends alpha-1 blockers for rapid symptom relief and 5-alpha-reductase inhibitors (5-ARIs) for men with moderate-to-severe LUTS who are at increased risk of progression, especially when prostate volume is greater than 40 mL. The American Urological Association similarly recommends 5-ARI therapy only when enlargement is demonstrated by imaging volume, palpable enlargement, or prostate-specific antigen (PSA) as a size proxy [1, 2]. This volume-based approach matters because 5-ARIs reduce the static component of obstruction, whereas alpha-blockers relax smooth muscle at the prostate and bladder neck.

Dutasteride inhibits both type 1 and type 2 5-alpha-reductase isoenzymes, thereby suppressing the conversion of testosterone to dihydrotestosterone more broadly than finasteride. Australian product information for both dutasteride monotherapy and dutasteride-tamsulosin combination therapy emphasizes that prostate-cancer risk assessment should occur before treatment and during follow-up. Mean PSA falls by approximately 50% after 6 months, and any confirmed rise from the lowest on-treatment PSA should be evaluated even if the absolute value remains within the usual untreated reference range [3, 4].

The strongest trial evidence supports long-term treatment in men with enlarged prostates and higher risk of BPH progression. The Medical Therapy of Prostatic Symptoms (MTOPS) trial showed that finasteride-based combination therapy reduced overall clinical BPH progression more than either monotherapy. The dutasteride-tamsulosin CombAT trial showed durable reductions in AUR and BPH-related surgery over 4 years in men enrolled with a prostate volume of at least 30 cm³ and a PSA of 1.5–10 ng/mL [5, 6].

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^aTranslational Research Department, Specialist Medical Services Group, Earlwood NSW 2206, Australia

^bData Science Institute, University of Technology Sydney, Ultimo, NSW 2007, Australia

^cNICM Health Research Institute, Western Sydney University, Westmead, NSW 2145, Australia

^dCorresponding Author: Enoch Chi Ngai Lim, Translational Research Department, Specialist Medical Services Group, Earlwood NSW 2206, Australia. Email: enoch@smsg.au

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The remaining concern is prostate-cancer detection. The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) warning followed the Prostate Cancer Prevention Trial (PCPT) and Reduction by Dutasteride of Prostate Cancer Events (REDUCE) trial. These trials reduced overall prostate-cancer detection but reported a higher proportion or numerical imbalance of high-grade cancers in treated groups [7–9]. In other words, these trials established increased risk of high-grade cancer due to delayed prostate cancer detection. Later evidence shifted interpretation toward delayed detection and PSA-monitoring effects rather than a clear lethal-cancer effect. Bias-adjusted PCPT modeling, extended PCPT follow-up, a mortality-focused systematic review, and recent Swedish and Ontario cohorts did not show increased prostate cancer-specific mortality [10–14]. In contrast, a Veterans Affairs cohort study showed delayed diagnosis and worse outcomes among 5-ARI users when PSA suppression was not managed correctly, showing that monitoring affects safety [15].

Methods

This narrative review used current urology guidelines, regulatory product information, pivotal randomized controlled trials, prostate-cancer prevention trials, systematic reviews, and population-based cohorts. We prioritized primary sources and authoritative guidelines or regulatory documents. Digital object identifier (DOI)-bearing references were checked against publisher, PubMed, or guideline metadata. Non-journal sources were retained only when they were primary or authoritative. Because the literature includes guidelines, trials, observational cohorts, and regulatory documents, a narrative approach was used rather than a pooled meta-analysis. The aim is to provide a practical academic review for clinicians managing BPH/LUTS with dutasteride-based therapy.

Evidence Synthesis

Patient selection: prostate size is a benefit–risk threshold

5-ARI therapy is a gland-indexed treatment. In men with large prostates, androgen-driven epithelial and stromal growth contributes to obstruction and future clinical risk. European Association of Urology (EAU) guidance reports that 5-ARIs reduce prostate size by approximately 18–28%, lower circulating PSA by approximately 50% after 6–12 months, improve International Prostate Symptom Score (IPSS) by approximately 15–30%, and increase peak urinary flow by approximately 1.5–2.0 mL/s after 2 to 4 years in men with LUTS due to prostatic enlargement [1]. It also notes that finasteride is not more effective than placebo when prostate volume is below 40 mL, while dutasteride may still help some men with volumes of 30–40 mL. These data support a practical size threshold rather than an absolute anatomical rule [1].

When imaging is unavailable, PSA can be used cautiously as a surrogate for volume, but not as a cancer-exclusion tool. The EAU diagnostic guidance reports that PSA has good predictive value for prostate volume, that PSA greater than 1.5

ng/mL predicts prostate volume above 30 mL with a positive predictive value of 78%, and that age-specific PSA cut-points can help identify glands larger than 40 mL [1]. AUA guidance similarly supports 5-ARI use when prostate enlargement is demonstrated by volume criteria, palpable enlargement, or PSA-based proxies [2]. Thus, the statement that a prostate is “not large enough” for dutasteride is a treatment-selection statement. It means the expected benefit is lower, while adverse effects and the complexity of PSA interpretation remain.

Efficacy of dutasteride and combination therapy

The MTOPS trial separated rapid symptom control from prevention of clinical progression. Doxazosin and finasteride each reduced clinical progression compared with placebo, but combination therapy produced the greatest risk reduction. Finasteride-containing arms were particularly important in reducing AUR and invasive therapy, supporting the role of 5-ARI treatment as disease-modifying rather than simple symptom palliation [5].

CombAT applied this principle to dutasteride plus tamsulosin. The trial enrolled men aged at least 50 years with moderate-to-severe symptoms, prostate volume at least 30 cm³, and PSA 1.5–10 ng/mL. Over 4 years, combination therapy produced stronger symptoms and progression outcomes than either component alone in this enlarged-prostate population [6]. EAU synthesis reports relative reductions versus tamsulosin of approximately 68% for AUR, 71% for BPH-related surgery, and 41% for symptom deterioration [1]. These results support fixed-dose dutasteride–tamsulosin when a man needs both early relief and long-term risk reduction, but they do not justify routine use in men with small prostates and minimal expected benefit.

Prostate-cancer signal: detection problem rather than proven lethal-cancer induction

The PCPT and REDUCE trials established the concern that 5-ARI therapy may increase the risk of delayed diagnosis leading to high-grade cancer detection. PCPT found fewer prostate cancers overall with finasteride but a greater proportion of detected Gleason 7–10 cancers [8]. REDUCE found fewer biopsy-detected prostate cancers with dutasteride but reported a numerical imbalance in Gleason 8–10 cancers, especially late in follow-up [9]. Regulatory warnings advise that 5-ARIs are not approved for prostate cancer prevention and may increase the chance of delayed diagnosis leading to high-grade disease [7].

Several factors make these trial findings difficult to interpret. 5-ARIs shrink the prostate, increase biopsy sampling density, change PSA performance, and may influence histological grading. Bias-adjusted PCPT modeling concluded that the apparent excess of high-grade cancer was unlikely to represent a true increase in aggressive tumors [10]. Long-term PCPT follow-up found no significant difference in overall survival between finasteride and placebo [11]. Mortality-focused

evidence is also reassuring: a systematic review and meta-analysis of more than 3 million patients found no significant association between 5-ARI use and prostate-cancer mortality, and large Swedish and Ontario cohorts did not show increased prostate cancer-specific mortality after adjustment [12–14].

Nevertheless, reassurance depends on surveillance. Sarkar et al found that 5-ARI use in a Veterans Affairs cohort was associated with longer time from PSA elevation to biopsy and worse prostate-cancer outcomes, a pattern consistent with under-recognition of PSA suppression rather than drug-driven carcinogenesis [15]. In practice, the modifiable hazard is misinterpretation of a suppressed PSA.

PSA surveillance and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)-first diagnostic escalation

PSA monitoring must be planned before dutasteride is prescribed. Product information for dutasteride monotherapy and dutasteride–tamsulosin combination therapy instructs clinicians to perform digital rectal examination (DRE) and appropriate cancer evaluation before therapy, establish a new PSA baseline after 6 months, monitor regularly, and evaluate any confirmed increase from the lowest on-treatment PSA [3, 4]. The traditional doubling rule compares a stabilized on-treatment PSA with untreated reference ranges by multiplying the measured value by approximately 2, but this is only a simplification. Expert PSA reviews recommend interpreting PSA in relation to the individual *nadir* and clinical context [16]. The REDUCE trial supports the usefulness of PSA rise as a cancer marker during dutasteride treatment and shows that increases after the 6-month *nadir* are particularly informative for clinically relevant or high-grade cancer [17, 18].

A practical approach is to document the pre-treatment PSA and DRE, record prostate volume or a volume proxy, repeat PSA at about 6 months, and label the result as the on-treatment baseline. Thereafter, any confirmed rise should prompt a review of adherence, an assessment for transient causes such as infection or instrumentation, and a referral for prostate-cancer risk assessment when unexplained. The PSA value should not be dismissed simply because it remains below a conventional threshold for untreated men.

Multiparametric MRI provides an additional diagnostic safeguard but does not replace serial PSA measurements. The EAU prostate-cancer guidance recommends MRI before biopsy in men with suspected organ-confined prostate cancer, adherence to Prostate Imaging Reporting and Data System (PI-RADS) acquisition and reporting standards, targeted biopsy where MRI shows a suspicious lesion and combined targeted plus perilesional sampling when PI-RADS is 4 or higher [19]. PSA density and family history refine decisions when MRI is negative or indeterminate. For 5-ARI users, MRI-first pathways are most effective when PSA changes are recognized promptly. Although reports of PSA–positron emission tomography (PET) discordance come from recurrent prostate cancer rather than BPH screening, they reinforce the broader diagnostic principle that imaging should complement, rather than replace, longitudinal PSA interpretation [20].

Adverse effects and shared decision-making

The benefit–risk discussion should include sexual, cardiovascular, mood, and metabolic considerations. EAU guidance and trial experience identify reduced libido, erectile dysfunction, and ejaculatory dysfunction as clinically important adverse effects, especially when dutasteride is combined with tamsulosin [1, 6]. Australian product information describes a cardiac-failure composite imbalance in some combination-therapy datasets while noting uncertainty about causality [3, 4]. These signals do not preclude treatment, but they make careful patient selection important, especially for men with small prostates, minimal expected benefit, or significant cardiovascular comorbidity.

Mood-related vigilance is also warranted. A Swedish registry study in JAMA Network Open found associations between 5-ARI exposure and depression; dementia associations diminished over time, and suicide associations were not supported in that analysis [21]. The European Medicines Agency subsequently confirmed suicidal ideation as an adverse effect of finasteride tablets and stated that a direct link could not be established for dutasteride, although dutasteride product information cautions about mood changes [22]. Clinicians should therefore ask about baseline mood symptoms and advise patients to report depressed mood or suicidal thoughts promptly.

A BMJ population-based study reported a higher risk of incident type 2 diabetes in men receiving 5-ARIs compared with tamsulosin, whereas a newer active-comparator, new-user cohort from Korea found minimal overall effects, with no significant increase in the risk of hyperglycemia for dutasteride compared with tamsulosin [23, 24]. For men with diabetes or high cardiometabolic risk, these data support monitoring rather than avoidance.

Clinical implementation

Table 1 [1–6, 15, 21–24] summarizes treatment selection by clinical phenotype. Table 2 [3, 4, 16–19] provides a surveillance framework for the central safety problem: avoiding delayed prostate-cancer detection while preserving the benefits of dutasteride-based therapy.

Discussion

The evidence base supports a balanced message: the evidence for dutasteride use is strongest when the prostate is enlarged, symptoms are bothersome, and prevention of AUR or surgery is clinically meaningful [1–6]. In the setting of a small prostate, the benefit is low in light of sexual adverse effects, mood and metabolic risks, and the complexity of PSA interpretation [1, 21–24]. Conversely, men with enlarged glands and high progression risk should not be denied effective therapy. The key safeguard is a system that makes PSA suppression visible to every clinician who interprets the result.

Documentation should therefore accompany prescribing

Table 1. Volume-Selected Treatment Framework for LUTS/BPH When Considering Dutasteride-Based Therapy

Clinical phenotype	Preferred treatment emphasis	Evidence-based rationale	Monitoring implications
Moderate-to-severe LUTS without clear enlargement (e.g., small prostate or low PSA-volume proxy)	Prioritize symptom-directed therapy such as an alpha-1 blocker; avoid routine 5-ARI initiation unless enlargement or increased risk is demonstrated.	5-ARI benefit is less predictable in small glands; the threshold is benefit–risk selection rather than a cancer-generation boundary [1, 2].	Assess baseline PSA/DRE according to age and cancer-risk context; do not start dutasteride merely to treat irritative LUTS without enlargement.
Demonstrable enlargement or increased progression risk (e.g., volume > 40 mL, palpable enlargement, or PSA proxy suggesting enlarged gland)	Consider dutasteride monotherapy when long-term risk reduction is a primary goal and rapid symptom relief is not essential.	5-ARIs reduce prostate volume, PSA, AUR, and BPH-related surgery risk in appropriately selected men [1, 3–5].	Record baseline PSA and prostate-size evidence; repeat PSA around 6 months and label the new on-treatment baseline.
Enlarged prostate plus bothersome moderate-to-severe LUTS requiring rapid relief and long-term risk reduction	Consider dutasteride–tamsulosin when the patient needs early symptom relief and long-term risk reduction and accepts the adverse-effect profile.	CombAT enrolled an enlarged-prostate, higher-risk population and showed durable reductions in AUR and surgery compared with tamsulosin alone [1, 6].	Apply dutasteride PSA rules because PSA suppression is driven by the 5-ARI component [3, 4].
Cancer suspicion at baseline or unexplained PSA abnormality before treatment	Defer or pause 5-ARI initiation until cancer risk is appropriately assessed.	Starting dutasteride before evaluation can complicate PSA interpretation and delay referral if the baseline is not documented [3, 4, 15].	Clarify DRE, PSA trend, PSA density where available, and MRI/biopsy pathway before long-term BPH pharmacotherapy.
Stable long-term responder on dutasteride or dutasteride–tamsulosin	Continue if symptom benefit exceeds harms; periodically review whether combination therapy remains necessary.	Benefits are long-term and phenotype-dependent; adverse effects and comorbidity burden may change over time [1, 6, 21–24].	Ensure every PSA request and referral letter states current or prior 5-ARI exposure.

AUR: acute urinary retention; BPH: benign prostatic hyperplasia; DRE: digital rectal examination; LUTS: lower urinary tract symptoms; PSA: prostate-specific antigen; 5-ARI: 5-alpha-reductase inhibitor.

Table 2. PSA and Prostate-Cancer Surveillance Pathway for Men Receiving Dutasteride or Dutasteride–Tamsulosin

Time point or event	Action	Interpretation and escalation
Before treatment	Document LUTS severity, DRE, baseline PSA, prostate volume or PSA-volume proxy, urinalysis as appropriate, and reason for choosing a 5-ARI.	Do not use a future suppressed PSA without knowing the pre-treatment value; investigate suspicious DRE or PSA before therapy [3, 4].
First 0–6 months	Expect PSA to fall progressively; avoid reassurance from a partially suppressed PSA.	Dutasteride lowers mean PSA by about 50% by 6 months, so the transition period is not a cancer-exclusion period [3, 4].
Approximately 6 months	Repeat PSA and designate the result as the new on-treatment baseline or <i>nadir</i> reference point.	The value may be doubled for comparison with untreated thresholds, but <i>nadir</i> -based interpretation is essential [3, 4, 16].
Ongoing monitoring	Check PSA periodically and ensure all clinicians know the patient is taking a 5-ARI.	A stable low PSA is expected; a confirmed rise is the clinically important signal [3, 4, 16–18].
Confirmed PSA increase from <i>nadir</i>	Repeat PSA to confirm; review adherence, prostatitis, urinary retention, instrumentation, and laboratory variability; refer if unexplained.	A rise from the lowest on-treatment PSA may indicate prostate cancer, including high-grade disease, or non-adherence. It should not be ignored [3, 4, 17, 18].
Cancer-risk assessment after referral	Use MRI before biopsy when suspected organ-confined prostate cancer is being evaluated; biopsy strategy should follow PI-RADS, PSA density, DRE, and patient risk.	MRI-first pathways reduce unnecessary biopsy but depend on timely recognition of the PSA signal in 5-ARI users [19].
After discontinuation	Continue surveillance according to clinical risk and recognize that PSA may return toward baseline over months.	Australian product information notes total serum PSA returns to baseline within 6 months after stopping dutasteride [3, 4].

DRE: digital rectal examination; MRI: magnetic resonance imaging; PI-RADS: Prostate Imaging Reporting and Data System; PSA: prostate-specific antigen; 5-ARI: 5-alpha-reductase inhibitor; LUTS: lower urinary tract symptoms.

ing. Records should include the baseline PSA, DRE result, prostate volume or PSA-volume proxy, indication for 5-ARI therapy, planned 6-month PSA re-baseline, and the instruction that any confirmed rise from *nadir* requires evaluation. A low raw PSA during therapy should be interpreted as an adjusted and kinetic result, not as a simple cancer-negative result. Electronic medical records and referral letters should state “on dutasteride/5-ARI” beside PSA values. Without this, the same medication that improves BPH outcomes can delay cancer diagnosis.

Limitations

This review is narrative and does not provide a formal pooled estimate of benefit or harm. The thresholds discussed here are based on guideline recommendations, trial inclusion criteria, and volume-surrogate analyses, rather than a single universally validated cut-point. In addition, prostate volume, PSA, baseline cancer risk, access to MRI, and clinician follow-up behavior vary substantially across health systems. Mortality reassurance is strongest in settings where PSA testing is recorded and acted on; it should not be extrapolated to situations in which PSA suppression is ignored, or referral pathways are inaccessible [12–15]. The evidence for mood and metabolic outcomes is also largely observational and vulnerable to residual confounding, although it is clinically relevant enough to inform counseling and follow-up [21–24]. These limitations support careful documentation and shared decision-making, rather than overprescribing 5-ARIs or avoiding them in men likely to benefit.

Conclusions

Dutasteride and dutasteride–tamsulosin remain evidence-based options for men with LUTS/BPH who have demonstrable prostatic enlargement and meaningful risk of AUR or surgery. Prostate size thresholds should be viewed as benefit–risk thresholds: larger glands are more likely to benefit, while smaller glands have less expected therapeutic gain but still require adverse-effect counseling and PSA reinterpretation. Current evidence does not show a clear increase in prostate cancer-specific mortality in adequately monitored 5-ARI users. Safe practice requires baseline assessment, 6-month PSA re-baselining, regular monitoring, prompt evaluation of any confirmed rise in PSA from *nadir*, and MRI-first diagnostic escalation when clinically indicated.

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Conflict of Interest

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Author Contributions

ECNL: conceptualization, data curation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, project administration, resources, software, writing—original draft, writing—review and editing. CEDL: conceptualization, resources, visualization, software, funding acquisition, validation, supervision, writing—review and editing.

Data Availability

The authors declare that data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Declaration

The authors used Grammarly (writing assistance software) for language editing and proofreading. No content was generated by AI, and the authors take full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the manuscript.

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