

Anatomists and pathologists have an unfortunate habit of naming human parts and disease processes after food. The revelation that atheroma is derived from the word porridge has blighted my breakfasts since early medical school. The caseating lesions of tuberculosis of course mean 'cheese like' and chocolate cysts and peau d'orange skin are equally off-putting. I'm afraid we urologists are little better. How many times, when asked about the prostate gland have you used the phrase, "Oh, about the size of a walnut / apricot / plum"?

The earliest reference I have found, so far, to our penchant for describing the prostate in terms of the contents of a fruit bowl comes from Jean Riolan the younger (1580–1657). In his 1649 book, *Anthropographia*, he describes the prostate as kernels or nuts (note the plural, the prostate was then seen as two organs, left and right, rather than one organ with lobes). Thomas Bartholin (1616–1680) was more particular. In his *Bartholinus*



Figure 1: A cornucopia of foodstuff, all used to describe prostatic size.

Giovanni Morgagni (1682–1771) the Italian anatomist who essentially invented anatomically based pathology, writes about the prostate as a “roundish protuberance, of the bigness of a small grape”. However, in the same book, *De Sedibus et Causis Morborum*, 1761 (or the seats and causes of disease), he also describes, “An excrescence of the prostate gland, in the form of a pear”. Quite a difference! The prostate of course is not only different sizes and shapes in each individual but changes

On 27 May 1817, George Langstaff (1780–1846) read a paper to the Medical and Chirurgical Society of London on fungus haematodes (soft tumours). He discussed the case of a 68-year-old pauper he had treated at the Cripplegate Workhouse, who had a tumour the size of an orange arising from the median lobe of the prostate, obstructing the ureters and with several lesions in the liver, the size of gooseberries, suggesting liver metastases. This was one of the earliest descriptions of prostate cancer in the literature and, helpfully for us, uses two fruit similes.

Walnut in younger men, apricot by the age of 40 and tennis ball, lemon or larger by 60
Chestnut-sized and shaped
Walnut sized and can grow to the size of a lemon
Size and shape of a walnut or a golf ball
Walnut in younger men, ping-pong ball as men age and tennis ball in older men
Golf ball in adults and can grow to the size of an orange
Walnut
Walnut and can grow to the size of a lemon
Walnut
Walnut under 30 years old, a slight enlargement at 30-50 years (still often within the walnut size range) and an apricot or even a lemon over 50 years
Plum

Sir William Fergusson (1808–1877), a pioneer of both the early lithotrite and prostatic surgery, gave us a challenge with his prostatic descriptions of a filbert and a horse bean. A filbert, we have now discovered, is an old name for hazelnut and a horse bean is a broad bean. Both appeared in his description of a perineal lithotomy operation, presented to The Pathological Society of London on 19 February 1849, where on extracting the stone, he also removed two tumours of the prostate which came away at the same time. This was an early (unintentional) perineal prostatectomy. Fergusson later suggested it could be used intentionally to remove obstructing pieces of prostate, but of course it was some years before that came to pass. Interestingly, in the following meeting, on 7 May, Mr Shaw (probably Alexander Shaw (1804–1890)) of the Middlesex, described similar ‘hazelnut’ sized prostatic tumours seen at postmortem in a patient with infected obstructive uropathy. Reginald Harrison (1837–1908) described another case like Fergusson’s in 1882, enucleating a ‘walnut’ of prostate at lithotomy. It was not until 1887, that Arthur McGill (1850–1890) of Leeds and William Belfield (1856–1929) in the USA began purposefully enucleating obstructive portions of the prostate. Incidentally, Belfield gave us more ‘hazelnut

Unsurprisingly, the prolific urological writers of the 19th century contributed significantly to the prostatic cornucopia. Sir Henry Thompson (1820–1904) felt the adult prostate to be generally the size of a horse chestnut. However, in diseased states he described one as the size of a small orange and, in perhaps the largest offering, another the size of a coconut, which filled the pelvis.

Finally, moving from fruit bowl to larder, both Mr Edwin Bickersteth (1828–1908) and W Bruce Clarke (1850–1914) described the enlarged prostate as the size of a hen's egg.

An internet search using Google with the parameters, "How big is my prostate?", "Prostate size" and "What is the size of the prostate" was carried out (January 2025). We excluded the AI overview and looked at the first 15 results. The first 11 websites all used fruit or nut similes to give an estimate of prostatic size, often using more than one when discussing age-related enlargement. The final fruit bowl containing eight walnuts, three lemons, two apricots, a chestnut, an orange and a plum.

