

Sutter Solano helps assess cancer risk

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If you could learn whether you were at especially high genetic risk for getting cancer some day, would you want to know?

Now you can, thanks to a new service offered at Vallejo's Sutter Solano Cancer Center, hospital officials said Tuesday.

And the answer, in certain cases, probably should be yes, said board-certified genetic counselor Maude Blundell, who runs the testing program.

"We're so excited about having someone with Maude's expertise," said Sutter Solano spokeswoman Janice Hoss. "She's the only genetic counselor in Solano County, Napa and as far as Berkeley."

Advances in genetics have made improved prevention, diagnosis and treatment possible, Blundell said, so for people with certain known risk factors, knowledge is power.

"It's very empowering," she said. "It allows people to make decisions on their time and not on cancer's time."

Sutter Solano spokesman Russell Neilson said Sutter officials are "really proud to offer this new service to the community and we think it truly adds to the comprehensiveness of our cancer program."

The program includes genetic counseling, testing, risk assessment and screening recommendations. But patients don't just get a scary probability quotient, Blundell said. Those identified as being at high risk for inheriting cancer can opt for intensified screening and preventive treatments, she said.

Those already diagnosed with certain cancers, like breast, ovarian and colon cancer, are among those for whom this testing might be helpful, Blundell said. Treatment options could be determined based on finding the identified genetic mutations that caused the cancer, Blundell said.

Women with Ashkenazi Jewish backgrounds tend to be at higher risk for breast, ovarian and colon cancer mutations, as are non-Jews with close family members diagnosed with the disease at a young age and any man diagnosed with breast cancer, she added.

Are you a candidate?

For more information, call 551-3400 or visit www.suttersolano.org/cancer.

Genetic testing might be in order if you and your family meet one or more of the following criteria:

- Multiple relatives on the same side of the family have had the same types of cancer.
- Cancer that occurs at a young age (under age 50).
- Rare cancers (like male breast cancer).
- Ashkenazi Jewish descent with breast cancer under age 50, or ovarian cancer at any age.
- Family member with a known cancer predisposition gene.
- Concern or anxiety about personal or family cancer risk.

Source: Sutter Solano Cancer Center

"Also, some people, who aren't going to benefit at all, decide to get this testing to benefit their children or other family members," she said.

"I have never had anyone regret doing the testing," Blundell said. "But I have, unfortunately, had patients regret putting it off."

Some people who might benefit from the testing hesitate out of fear the information could be used against them by insurance companies and employers, Blundell said.

"But we have state and federal laws preventing genetic discrimination," she said. "They're not allowed to consider it a pre-existing condition."

Some patients referred to Blundell have been diagnosed with cancer at an earlier age than would be expected and want to understand their risk of developing a second cancer or if family members may be at increased risk, she said. Others have a strong family history of cancer and want to know if they are also at risk for the disease.



NURSE JANIE HOSS, left, director of cancer services at Sutter Solano, confers with genetic counselor Maude Blundell. (Courtesy photo)

"An individual diagnosed with breast cancer under age 45 or with colon cancer under age 50 would be a good candidate for genetic counseling," Blundell said.

Blundell says early screening for cancer, such as mammograms, colonoscopies and pap tests, are the first defense. Patients should consult their doctor about their risk and have a thorough knowledge of their family health history, she said.