



Counseling for cancer risk

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One in three Americans will be diagnosed with cancer in his or her lifetime. The reason cancer develops is often unknown, but it may be caused by a combination of factors, including environmental exposures or lifestyle. For 5 percent to 10 percent of individuals with cancer, the disease has a hereditary component which means that the person has inherited a change in DNA that increases the risk for cancer.

Counseling for cancer risk

Genetic counselors provide information that allows individuals to make informed choices on their genetic risk. We provide genetic counseling, risk assessment, screening recommendations and when appropriate, offer genetic testing. Identification of individuals at high risk of cancer may allow for intensified screening and preventive treatments to reduce the risk of cancer.

Often, patients referred to me 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. Others have a strong family history of cancer and want to know if they are also at risk for the disease. An individual diagnosed with colon cancer under age 50 or with breast cancer under age 45 would be a good candidate for genetic counseling.

Genetics in breast and ovarian cancer

Women with family histories of breast and ovarian cancers are among the most common referred to my practice. A diagnosis at an early age is most often the most important risk factor. For example, a woman whose mother was diagnosed with breast cancer at age 35 may be at increased risk where a woman whose mother was diagnosed at 60 might not. Any man diagnosed with breast cancer should be referred for genetic counseling. Another risk factor to take into consideration is your ancestry. Women of Jewish heritage are at increased risk for carrying a genetic change that increases the likelihood of breast and ovarian cancer. It's also important to realize that you can inherit a risk of breast and ovarian cancer from your father's side.

Goals for a counseling session

Genetic counseling is a communication process that translates technical and complicated knowledge into practical information for individuals and their families.

My goals for a genetic counseling session are to:

- Determine the likelihood that cancer in a family is inherited.
- Discuss options for early identification and risk reduction.
- Provide information about the benefits, risks and limitations of genetic testing.
- Coordinate the testing process and accurately interpret the results.

- Give referrals for appropriate research studies.

I begin all my patient relationships by trying to understand the individual's concerns, which most often centers on the possibility of passing on certain diseases to their children. The counseling session includes explaining basic genetics and gathering an extensive family health history. We determine which screenings may be appropriate and discuss the pros and cons of genetic testing, and then the patient decides whether to proceed.

Testing for risk

The decision to pursue genetic counseling and testing is an individual one. A goal of the genetic counseling session is to help the patient work through the decision-making process regarding testing. Before making a decision about testing, you should clearly understand how the results of the test may affect your life.

It's important, however, to know that early screening for cancer, such as mammograms, colonoscopies and Pap tests, are your first defense against cancer. Talk to your physician about your risk and be sure to have a thorough knowledge of your family health history.

Call 554-5326 for more information.