

## FOR YOUR HEALTH

## For some patients, answers are in genes

By MAUDE BLUNDELL

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 five 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.

*Maude Blundell, M.S., CGC, is a board-certified genetic counselor with Sutter Solano Cancer Center, which is a member of the Solano Coalition for Better Health.*

## Panel recommends vaccine for smokers

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ATLANTA — For the first time, an influential government panel is recommending a vaccination specifically for smokers.

The panel decided Wednesday that adult smokers under 65 should get pneumococcal vaccine. The shot -- already recommended for anyone 65 or older -- protects against bacteria that cause pneumonia, meningitis and other illnesses.

Federal officials usually adopt recommendations made by the panel, the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices.

The vote means more than 31 million adult smokers probably will soon be called on to get the shot.

Studies have shown that smokers are about four times more likely than non-smokers to suffer pneumococcal disease. Also, the more cigarettes someone smokes each day, the higher the odds they'll develop the illnesses.

Why smokers are more susceptible is not known for

sure, but some scientists believe it has to do with smoking-caused damage that allows the bacteria to more easily attach to the lungs and windpipe, said Dr. Pekka Nuorti, a medical epidemiologist with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Pneumococcal infections are considered the top killer among vaccine-preventable diseases.

It's a common complication of influenza, especially in the elderly, and is considered responsible for many of the 36,000 annual deaths attributed to flu.

The committee voted 11 to 3 to pass the recommendation, with one member abstaining.

The panel also added a call for smoking cessation counseling.

Some members said it might be more cost effective to recommend the vaccine for smokers who were at least age 40, because pneumococcal disease is relatively uncommon in younger smokers. Others at the meeting made the same argument.

## Study: Food allergies increasing

By MIKE STOBBE  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ATLANTA — Food allergies in American children seem to be on the rise, now affecting about 3 million kids, according to the first federal study of the problem.

But experts said that might be because parents are more aware and quicker to have their kids checked out by a doctor.

About 1 in 26 children had food allergies last year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported Wednesday. That's up from 1 in 29 kids in 1997.

The 18 percent increase is significant enough to be considered more than a statistical blip, said Amy Branum of the CDC, the study's lead author.

Nobody knows for sure what's driving the increase. A doubling in peanut allergies -- noted in earlier studies -- is one factor, some experts said. Also, children seem to be taking longer to outgrow milk and egg allergies than they did in decades past.

But also figuring into the equation are parents and doctors who are more likely to consider food as the trigger for symptoms like vomiting, skin rashes and breathing problems.

"A couple of decades ago, it was not uncommon to have kids sick all the time

## Food allergies

In 2007, approximately 3 million children under age 18 years were reported to have a food or digestive allergy, according to a study.

Hospital discharges per year among children diagnosed with food allergies (average)

|           |       |
|-----------|-------|
| 1998-2000 | 2,615 |
| 2001-2003 | 4,135 |
| 2004-2006 | 9,537 |



SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

and we just said 'They have a weak stomach' or 'They're sickly,'" said Anne Munoz-Furlong, chief executive of the Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network, a Virginia-based advocacy organization.

Parents today are quicker to take their kids to specialists to check out the possibility of food allergies, said Munoz-Furlong, who founded the nonprofit in 1991.

The CDC results came from an in-person, door-to-door survey in 2007 of the households of 9,500 U.S. children under age 18.

When asked if a child in the house had any kind of food allergy in the previous 12 months, about 4 percent said yes. The parents were not asked if a doctor had made the diagnosis, and no medical records were

## Children with food or digestive allergies (in the past 12 months)

AGE

|            |      |
|------------|------|
| <5 years   | 4.7% |
| 5-17 years | 3.7  |

SEX

|        |     |
|--------|-----|
| Male   | 3.8 |
| Female | 4.1 |

RACE/ETHNICITY

|          |     |
|----------|-----|
| White    | 4.1 |
| Black    | 4   |
| Hispanic | 3.1 |



SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

checked. Some parents may not know the difference between immune system-based food allergies and digestive disorders like lactose intolerance, so it's possible the study's findings are a bit off, Branum said.

However, the study's results mirror older national estimates that were extrapolated from smaller, more intensive studies, said Dr. Hugh Sampson, a food allergy researcher at the Mount Sinai School of medicine.

"This tells us those earlier extrapolations were fairly close," Sampson said.

The CDC study did not give a breakdown of which foods were to blame for the allergies. Other research suggests that about 1 in 40 Americans will have a milk allergy at some point in their lives, and 1 in 50 percent

will be allergic to eggs. Most people outgrow these allergies in childhood.

About 1 in 50 are allergic to shellfish and nearly 1 in 100 react to peanuts, allergies that generally persist for a lifetime, according to Sampson.

Some people have more than one food allergy, he said, explaining why the overall food allergy prevalence is about 4 percent.

Children with food allergies also were more likely to have asthma, eczema and respiratory problems than kids without food allergies, the CDC study found, confirming previous research.

The study also found that the number of children hospitalized for food allergies was up. The number of hospital discharges jumped from about 2,600 a year in the late 1990s to more than 9,500 annually in recent years, the CDC results showed.

Also, Hispanic children had lower rates of food allergies than white or black children -- the first such racial/ethnic breakdown in a national study.

The reason for that last finding may not be genetics, said Munoz-Furlong. She is Hispanic and said people in her own family have been unwilling to consider food allergies as the reason for children's illnesses. "It's a question of awareness," she said.

## ANNIE'S MAILBOX

## Is it appropriate to write thank-you notes for gifts I get from my students?

**Dear Annie:** I am a teacher in a school where we are lucky enough to receive lovely gifts for Christmas and at the end of the year. These are usually plants, lotions, \$10 gift cards, etc., often accompanied by darling notes from the students.

At Christmas, I diligently write out thank-you notes to my students, but I don't know what to do at the end of the year. Some teachers say all gifts should be acknowledged in writing, but others feel that these gifts are essentially "thank-you presents" and do not require a note. What do you say? — Grateful but Confused Teacher

**Dear Grateful:** Please acknowledge all such gifts in writing. They do not fall into the category of tips for services rendered. Plus, a written note from the teacher sends an excellent message about manners and the importance of a personal touch. It will surely mean a great deal to your students.

**Dear Annie:** My father was a vile, cruel man who

for 12 years molested, threatened, humiliated and beat my sisters and me. We never told my mother about the sexual abuse. I once brought up the subject indirectly, and she said she'd first kill our father and then come after us. I left home when I was young and lived on the streets, where I was raped and beaten and got into some very bad relationships.

My father died four years ago, and since then, my mother has turned him into a saint. I love my mom with everything that is in me, but I am so mad at her. She could have saved us, but her eyes were always closed. I have kept my father's secret for so long that even now he is still controlling me. My mom's health is failing and I believe telling her would kill her.

I want desperately to look in the mirror without seeing my father's shadow behind me. I am angry all the time. I want to tell my husband I love him without being afraid he will hurt me. I have already had one

failed marriage. I am scared I'll destroy my current marriage because I won't let anyone get close to me. I want to talk to my mom without being so angry. — Running from Shadows in Virginia

**Dear Virginia:** The truth is, your anger toward your mother is bubbling over, but you are forcing yourself to hold it in. Although the therapist you saw in the past obviously didn't help enough, the process can still be worthwhile and we hope you will reconsider therapy. What do you have to lose? Contact Adult Survivors of Child Abuse (ascasupport.org), P.O. Box 14477, San Francisco, CA 94114, or the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (rainn.org) at 1-800-656-HOPE (1-800-656-4673).

**Dear Annie:** I could be the daughter of "Not Really Married," who doesn't want his kids to plan a 50th anniversary party.

My parents have been married for 54 years, very few of them happy. My mother got tired of my fa-

ther's antics, of which there are many, and stopped having sex with him. It didn't make the marriage better for her, just less stressful. For Dad, it went from a great marriage (for him) to an empty shell. They stay together for financial reasons. We children have been more perceptive about the situation and asked about a 50th anniversary party. The answer was a resounding "no" from both of them.

My father once said, "Your mother isn't the same woman I married." I replied, "And you're not the same man. Deal with it." — Upstate N.Y.

**Dear Upstate:** When neither parent wants to celebrate an anniversary, it makes sense not to do it. Your parents' situation sounds sad. Our condolences.

**Dear Readers:** Today is Mother-in-Law Day. Please give yours a call.

Please e-mail your questions to [anniesmailbox@comcast.net](mailto:anniesmailbox@comcast.net), or write to: Annie's Mailbox, P.O. Box 118190, Chicago, IL 60611.

## HOROSCOPES

BY HOLIDAY MATHIS

## Today's birthday

You will live more fully in the humor of things. It's a year to be grand, pretentious even, but never boring! Friends flock to you over the holidays because your attitude and style are so attractive. There's a sweet reunion in January. Your work gives you thrills in February. An investment pays in May. Gemini and Pisces adore you. Your lucky numbers are: 6, 10, 44, 30 and 19.

ing it. A certain fawning someone in your midst has an angle. This person wants something from you and is not saying what it is yet.

**LEO** (July 23-Aug. 22). You're learning not to judge. For instance, there is a behavior you witnessed someone doing in the past and you thought to yourself, "I would never." And yet,

today you may find yourself engaged in similar behavior.

**VIRGO** (Aug. 23-Sept. 22). You're worried that if you don't push things to completion, they will never get done. In actuality, these things will get done eventually. But that extra push you give makes sure that they are done right, and in a timely manner.

**LIBRA** (Sept. 23-Oct. 23). You'll receive some good news about money, and that always lifts your spirits. It's not the cash value involved that you care about, but the thrilling experiences you'll finally be able to afford.

**SCORPIO** (Oct. 24-Nov. 21). The chaos of your thoughts creates a lot of energy. You're not confused; rather you have a million ideas colliding around in your noggin. You're all abuzz, even when you've been working for hours.

**SAGITTARIUS** (Nov. 22-

Dec. 21). Your minor interest in other people's finances is about to become major. Someone else's solvency affects yours. The care you put into communication matters greatly to the success of a deal.

**CAPRICORN** (Dec. 22-Jan. 19). Choose carefully what you'll strive for. You want something that is currently possessed by someone you admire.

**AQUARIUS** (Jan. 20-Feb. 18). You have some weird kind of affection for one who has criticized you. Maybe she was right, though the manner of delivery was unnecessarily harsh.

**PISCES** (Feb. 19-March 20). You are waiting for something to happen and enthralled in the suspense. Resist the urge to rush ahead. Your maturity and ability to delay your satisfaction will bring you much satisfaction in the end.