

Genetics screening identifies patients at high-risk for cancer

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By Kathleen Hall

Imagine hearing the diagnosis “cancer” delivered to a family member again...and again...and again. Kathleen Gurciullo of Colonial Heights doesn’t have to imagine. Gurciullo lost her mother to breast cancer. And her sister. She lost three aunts to breast cancer. And she lost her brother to colon and bladder cancer.

With cancer so prevalent in her family, it made sense for Gurciullo to consider genetic testing to see if she too was at risk.

“I wanted to [be tested] years ago,” said Gurciullo, but her insurance coverage made it prohibitive. But after finding a lump in her breast, her doctor recommended she be screened at CJW Medical Center and Gurciullo was happy to comply.

Happily, the results were negative.

For most people with a family history of breast, ovarian, colon, or endometrial cancer, genetics testing is not an easy decision and one not to be entered into lightly. Karen Roesser, clinical coordinator at CJW, thoroughly counsels patients considering screening.

“It [the results] doesn’t just affect one person in a vacuum,” she explained. “It affects a lot of people.” Even though all cancer is genetic, only five to ten percent is inherited. However, a positive result may mean family members are also at higher risk so it’s important to consider how your family may react.

Dr. Pablo Gonzalez, an oncologist, refers patients to Roesser. “The majority of patients don’t want to be tested,” he said. For many, the implications of a positive test—informing family members, potentially living with fear, making healthcare decisions based on risk factors—are more significant than the need to know.

“It’s very emotional. It’s not easy or simple,” says Gonzalez. “What if you test positive? It can be a very scary thing and there are many issues to consider.”

A physician must refer patients and only those who fall into a high-risk category, which is a very select group, qualify. When determining appropriate candidates, Dr. Gonzalez looks at the number of family members who had cancer, the age of onset, and the type of cancer. If a family member had breast cancer at a young age, it is more significant than if the patient’s mother or aunt was diagnosed at an advanced age when the risk of breast cancer is higher.

The screening consists of a simple blood test. Genetics screening does not test for the cancer itself, but for *mutations* in the usual DNA sequence part of the gene that indicates a hereditary predisposition to cancer. Most diseases have their roots in genes that have been altered or mutated. These changes can be inherited (carried in the DNA) or acquired during our lifetime.

A negative test does not mean the patient will never get cancer; it means they do not have the mutated gene that may cause cancer or they may have a mutation not yet identified. And a positive result does not mean the person *has* cancer; they are just at higher risk for developing it.

Patients must decide if the test makes sense for them. For women (or men predisposed to the breast cancer mutation) who don't have cancer but test positive, this knowledge can be power, giving them the option to make proactive health care decisions.

Some cancer patients will be screened so they can inform family members of *their* potential risk. But Dr. Gonzalez says a patient must know if her family *wants* to know. As a physician, he cannot relay this confidential information.

The test is expensive. If you are a candidate for genetic screening, check to see if your insurance company covers it. Gurciullo encourages people who want to be tested not to take a "no" from their insurance company at face value. "Fight it," she said.

For Gurciullo, the screening provided some peace of mind. She was not apprehensive about the test; her main worry was her children's risk factor. "The negative result relieved me quite a bit," she said.

CJW Medical Center is hosting a "Lunch with the Docs" on the topic of genetics testing and how it can determine a patient's risk for certain cancers on July 14 at Ruth's Chris Steak House. An oncologist will also share details about gene mapping and its implications for fighting cancer. **Due** to limited seating, reservations and payment in advance are required by calling (804) 327-3326, no later than July 9. Cost is \$9.