

Genetic Counselling: Is It For You?

By Deepti Babu, M.S. C.G.C

Many of us know someone who has had breast cancer. The fact is, breast cancer is fairly common – a Canadian woman has about a 12% chance to develop breast cancer in her lifetime. If this happens, in most cases she will not have a strong family history of breast cancer.

Families with hereditary breast and ovarian cancer are a bit unique. There are usually multiple individuals diagnosed with these and related cancers, and they are often diagnosed at younger ages than usual. If you have ever wondered about your own family history, genetic counseling may be something for you to consider. It could provide you and your family with information and options to help tailor your medical care, in an active effort to maintain your health.

Prior to a genetic counseling appointment, we usually need to gather some information. At our clinic in Edmonton, we first ask for details about the family history, focusing on the individuals who have had a cancer diagnosis. Once a family tree has been established, we are much more able to give an accurate risk assessment.

The next steps can be the most time-consuming but are very important. As you may know, family lore can be quite different from reality. For example, did Aunt Mabel have ovarian cancer, or was it actually something else? Determining Aunt Mabel's accurate diagnosis can be critical to what we tell her relatives about their cancer risks. For this reason, we make a habit of requesting medical records from people's cancer diagnoses. This may require permission from the affected relatives or their next of kin, but in our experience this is not a problem for most families.

We welcome patients to bring someone to their appointment with them – another pair of ears can be very beneficial. Following appointments we usually send a summary letter to the patient and referring physician, which helps to keep everyone in the loop.

An initial genetic counseling appointment usually involves the following: a careful review of one's family history, information about cancer genetics, a cancer risk assessment and screening recommendations for the patient and his or her family members. Genetic testing may be offered, but always following a thorough conversation about the pros and cons. No one attending a genetic counseling session is obligated to have genetic testing.

For those who wish to proceed, genetic testing involves a standard blood draw. The wait time for results is unfortunately not short, unlike many other medical tests. Genetic testing also has its limitations, and in a few cases results are not easy to interpret. For this reason, a follow-up appointment is always offered when genetic test results return. Topics for these appointments may include going over the results, reviewing medical management options (such as preventive surgery or heightened surveillance) and the possibility of offering genetic testing to interested family members. In some cases we are able to offer specific medical options only after learning one's genetic test results, so testing can be very useful in these situations.

The psychological impact of one's family history or genetic test results cannot be underestimated, and we always try to convey information in a sensitive, caring manner. If someone has counseling needs of a more therapeutic nature, we may offer a referral to a mental health professional that can help him or her on a long-term basis. In addition, organizations like the Hereditary Breast and Ovarian Cancer Society of Alberta are invaluable ways for members of hereditary families to access other types of support and resources.

If after reading this you feel that genetic counseling may be helpful for you, you may wish to seek a referral to the Edmonton or Calgary cancer genetics clinic. Most people pursue genetic counseling through a referral from their family physician or specialist. In some cases, a family member prompts the issue because they have already had genetic counseling or testing.

However you reach us, we will try our best to offer useful information in a manner that is helpful and supportive. Navigating through the various issues can sometimes be a challenge, but our goal is to make that process as easy as possible. ☒

Cancer genetic counselors in Alberta can be reached by calling:

University of Alberta Hospital (Edmonton) 780.407.7336

Alberta Children's Hospital (Calgary): 403.943.7373

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