

What are hereditary cancer syndromes?

Few families can say they have not been affected by cancer. But some people may feel as though a certain type of cancer runs in their families.

In certain instances, such suspicions are warranted.

According to the National Cancer Institute, hereditary cancer syndromes are disorders that may predispose individuals to developing certain cancers. The NCI notes that researchers have associated mutations in specific genes with more than 50 hereditary cancer syndromes.

Before people, or even entire families, begin thinking that a certain type of cancer runs in their families, it's important to first examine certain lifestyle choices to determine if such factors, and not gene mutations, are responsible. In fact, the NCI notes that hereditary cancer syndromes play a role in just 5 to 10 percent of all cancers.

Tobacco use is one lifestyle choice that can cause similar cancers to develop among family members. Smoking greatly increases a person's risk of developing cancer, and even that person's nonsmoking family members may have a higher risk for cancer due to exposure to secondhand smoke. Other factors, such as poor diet, also may increase the likelihood that people within a family may get cancer. Neither instance, however, is the result of hereditary cancer syndrome.

People who suspect they



might be at risk for hereditary cancer syndromes should express their concerns to their physicians. Primary care physicians and other health professionals will then work to determine if patients are at risk. If a person is identified as at risk for developing hereditary cancer syndromes, then he or she may be referred for genetic counseling and risk assessment, and certain tests also may be conducted as physicians work to develop a plan to manage risk.

A patient's family history helps physicians determine if there is a risk for hereditary

cancer syndrome. The NCI notes that physicians may look for the following features of hereditary cancer in the patient's family.

- One first-degree relative with the same or a related tumor and any of a number of features specific to the patient (a list of individual features of hereditary cancer is available at www.cancer.gov).

- Two or more first-degree relatives with tumors of the same site.

- Two or more first-degree relatives with tumor types belonging to a known familial

cancer syndrome.

- Two or more first-degree relatives with rare tumors.

- Three or more relatives in two generations with tumors of the same site or etiologically related sites.

Hereditary cancer syndromes are relatively uncommon, but that does not discount the importance of determining one's risk for such cancers. The NCI notes that finding out one is at risk of hereditary cancer can potentially have life-saving implications. More information on hereditary cancers is available at www.cancer.gov.

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