

Assessing your risk for cancer

**By Katie Lang, MS, CGC
Northside Hospital Cancer Inst.**

At-home DNA kits are more popular than ever before. You can learn where your ancestors are from and find distant cousins and other long-lost relatives. Much can be learned from creating your family tree, especially if you include a family health history.

Ten percent of all diagnosed cancers are inherited. If your family has a history of cancer, you now have the power to learn more about hereditary cancer risks for you and your children.

What is hereditary cancer? It's when there are mutations (changes) in specific genes that are passed down from either parent. These mutations greatly increase a person's risk of developing certain types of cancer.

There have been dozens of genes discovered that can increase a person's risk to develop cancer. If a mutation in a cancer-causing gene is identified within a family, it has the potential to help the entire family better understand their risks and be proactive. It could also help those individuals in the family who did not inherit the mutation, since these genes are only passed down 50% of the time.

If you have a strong family history of cancer, genetic testing can help you assess your personal risk and make a decision regarding preventive measures and access earlier or more frequent cancer screenings. Testing can provide information on risks for a wide range of cancers including breast, colon, prostate, ovarian, and uterine cancers.

And women aren't the only ones who should consider genetic testing. Men can inherit and pass on these genetic mutations. In fact, 50% of all mutation

carriers are men even though they are tested at far lower rates than women.

It's important to note though that a genetic test does not diagnose cancer. It can only give you risk information – tell you about gene mutations that you have that increase your risk of developing cancer.

Genetic counseling is recommended before and after any genetic testing to help you learn the implications for the results you receive and options for next steps. Part of the consultation includes the cost of testing. Many people don't realize that the cost for testing has

dropped considerably in recent years, and it is very well covered by insurance.

Knowledge is power, and genetic testing can be the first step to taking action against your cancer risk.

Katie Lang, MS, CGC is a certified genetic counselor and the coordinator of the Cancer Genetics Program at Northside Hospital Cancer Institute. Appointments are available in Cumming, Alpharetta, Canton, Holly Springs, Atlanta and Stockbridge. For more information, call 404-851-6284 or visit, northside.com/cancer-genetics-program.

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