

Genetic Counseling Myths

Myth No. 1

“I have no family history of cancer. Genetics can’t have anything to do with my cancer.”

Fact: Only about one-third of people with breast cancer or colon cancer report having a family history of the disease. Most people who get cancer do not have a family history of that type of cancer. Your genes may still play a major role, depending on your age and type of cancer.

Myth No. 2

“My parent has cancer or I have family members with cancer so I must be high risk.”
Or, “I have cancer, so my children must be high risk.”

Fact: It is natural to worry about your risk for cancer when it affects a close relative, or worry about your children if you have cancer. Even if you have a close relative with cancer, this does not always mean you are at a “high risk” for this cancer.

If this concerns you, talk with a genetic counselor. He or she can clarify your cancer risks and tell you about your options.

Myth No. 3

“I don’t want to go for genetic counseling because I don’t want a gene test.”

Fact: Genetic counseling is **not** the same thing as gene testing. The genetic counselor will ask for your personal and family history, assess your cancer risk and give you a management plan specific to your risks.

A gene test may help **some** people, but it is not right for everyone. A genetic counselor will help you decide if a gene test is right for you.

Myth No. 4

“I will lose my insurance if I get genetic counseling or if I have an abnormal gene test.”

Fact: What you share with the genetic counselor is probably already in your medical record, such as your personal or family history.

What you tell a genetic counselor is protected by federal law. Group and individual health insurers are prevented from using results of a gene test to affect your eligibility or rates.

Your genetic counselor can tell you about the 2008 Genetic Information Non-discrimination Act and any state laws that offer protection.

Myth No. 5

“My insurance company will not pay for a gene test.”

Fact: While this may be true for some, most major insurance companies (such as BlueCross BlueShield, Aetna, UnitedHealthcare, HealthPartners, Medica or Medicare) cover gene testing if the correct test is ordered on the correct individual.

A genetic counselor can answer your questions or concerns.

(over)

Myth No. 6

“I had a normal (negative) gene test. My relatives don’t have to worry.”

Fact: Not all genes that cause cancer have been found. This means even if you have a normal gene test you and your relatives may still have a higher risk of cancer.

A genetic counselor can help explain test results, clarify any risks for you and your family, and help determine if other gene tests are right for you.

Myth No. 7

“An abnormal (positive) gene test means I will get cancer. What’s the point in testing?”

Fact: A positive test result indicates you have a higher risk for getting certain types of cancer (this depends on the gene involved). It does not mean you will certainly get cancer.

Knowing your risk gives you access to screening to help find cancer early when it is most treatable. You can also take steps to prevent cancer.

Myth No. 8

“Anyone who wants to know his or her risk of getting cancer should get a gene test.”

Fact: Gene testing alone will usually not determine your risk for cancer. It is most valuable for a select group of people who may have a personal or family history of certain types of cancer diagnosed at certain ages, or for people of certain ethnic backgrounds.

Most people will not need a gene test if they have no personal or family history of cancer.

Genetic counselors can help figure out if you would benefit from a gene test.

Myth No. 9

“All cancer is hereditary.”

Fact: While 20 to 30 percent of cancers may occur in family clusters, this is not always because of genetics. Some clusters occur by chance; some due to shared environment or lifestyle, others may be due to many genes or a combination of many factors.

Only 5 to 10 percent of all cancer is thought to be due to a major inherited risk.

Genetic counseling may help sort out what is causing the cancers in your family.

Myth No. 10

“There are only genes for breast cancer.”

Fact: There are several genes that can cause a risk for many different cancers that can run in families, such as colon cancer, stomach cancer and uterine cancer. Some genetic changes create higher risks than others and very few genes create a risk for just one type of cancer.

If there is any concern about cancer in your family, a genetic counselor can help clarify your risks and help with testing decisions.