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I'm High Risk: What Do I Do?

If you have a family history of breast cancer on your mother's or father's side, you are considered "high risk" for the disease. "High risk" is a term that terrorizes thousands of women each year after a family member's diagnosis of breast cancer. Thoughts that "this can happen to me, too" can cloud the future and fill you with fear. Often, this fear may be so overwhelming that some women avoid taking necessary precautionary measures. Others become super-zealous and obsessive in checking their breasts. What is a normal, healthy and balanced approach to breast care if you are considered high risk?

In some ways, being considered high risk may be a blessing, one that could save your life. You may wonder how. Because of a family member's breast cancer, you and your healthcare provider will most probably watch your breast health more carefully. If cancer should occur, close monitoring should find it in an early stage, when it is most treatable. Women with no history may lack the motivation to be diligent and may ignore guidelines for early detection and screening, resulting in late detection.

Don't be frightened of the term "high risk." Being at high risk does not mean that you will get cancer. It is, however, like a yellow light—a warning to be cautious. A family history is no reason for panic; rather, it should be motivation to learn steps for protection and early detection.

Hereditary Breast Cancer

Based on current information, approximately 7 to 10 percent of breast cancer patients have a family history that includes a mutated gene that is inherited from a mother or a father. Hereditary breast cancer is caused by one of two identified genes, BRCA1 or BRCA2, (BR=breast; CA=cancer).

The typical characteristics of breast cancer caused by a hereditary gene mutation are included in the following list. If you find that your family history has any of these characteristics, call your medical center and ask who you can speak with to discuss your risk.

Genetic Testing May Be Recommended For:

- Breast cancer before age 50
- Ovarian cancer at any age
- Two primary breast cancers in the same individual at any age
- Both breast and ovarian cancer in same individual at any age
- Male breast cancer at any age
- Two or more breast cancers in a family, one under 50
- Three or more relatives with breast cancer at any age
- Ashkenazi Jewish ancestry, breast cancer at any age
- Triple negative breast cancer at any age (Negative ER, PR and HER2)
- Identified BRCA mutation in the family
- Pancreatic cancer with breast or ovarian cancer in the same person or on the same side of the family

Do not hesitate to remind your treatment team of any characteristics you see in your history that may qualify you for genetic testing. If there are any questions that cause you or your treatment team doubt, seek the advice of a genetic counselor or professional. A genetics professional uses a tool called a three-generation pedigree to record the family history. This helps determine the pattern of cancers in the family and whether genetic testing may be appropriate.

If you find that your family history includes one or more of these characteristics, ask to speak to a professional counselor about your own risk. The counselor can determine if your history qualifies you for BRCA testing. If you should decide to have the test, a small sample of blood will be drawn or an oral swish rinse will be used to collect a saliva sample. The sample will be sent to a special laboratory to determine the presence of a BRCA mutation. The testing process takes approximately four weeks. The result is returned to your counselor, who will give you the results. If genetic testing for the mutated gene is negative, your risk is the same as the normal population's. If the test finds that you are a "carrier" of the family mutation, your physician will discuss options for increased surveillance, drugs for prevention or prophylactic surgery, along with lifestyle changes discussed below.

Taking Charge of Your Breast Health

- Find a healthcare provider who understands your risk and takes a special interest in early detection for breast cancer. Look for a healthcare provider you feel comfortable talking with about your breasts and who supports you in learning how to monitor your breasts. After reviewing your family and personal cancer history, the provider will determine if you qualify for BRCA testing.
- Provide your healthcare provider with the name or type of breast cancer your relative had. (There are approximately 15 different major types of breast cancer with variations in how they are found and treated.) Breast cancer that is hereditary may show up in the same manner as the relative's cancer; therefore, knowing the type of cancer is helpful for early detection. For example, if your sister's cancer did not show up on a mammogram, your healthcare provider will not depend on a mammogram alone to detect potential problems.
- Learn how to perform a breast self-exam from a qualified instructor.
- Perform a breast self-exam during the same time of your monthly cycle each month. Allow time to perform a thorough exam. Do not examine your breasts more than once a month. This is not necessary. Because the breasts are changing during the month, random checking could cause confusion about what is normal for your breasts.
- Comply with mammography screening guidelines for high-risk women. Although guidelines vary, most experts agree that if there is a family history, yearly mammography with a baseline at 35 years is important. If the family history includes a pre-menopausal breast cancer, mammography starting ten years earlier than when the relative's breast cancer occurred is often a recommended guideline.
- Change lifestyle factors that have been implicated as risk factors for many diseases. The following changes in lifestyle have proven to promote better general health and decrease the risk of other diseases. Your goal is to improve and maintain your general health. No one has proven specifically what causes or prevents breast cancer, but we do know what creates good general health.
    - Avoid high fat diets, especially animal fats. A low animal fat, high-fiber diet is a wise choice. Replace sugary, fatty foods with a diet of fresh fruit, vegetables and whole grains.
    - Monitor alcohol consumption. Alcohol consumption has been proven to promote breast cancer and other diseases. Drink in moderation, or better yet, not at all. Remember, beer and wine are alcoholic beverages.
    - Avoid carcinogens (proven cancer-causing agents) that have been identified in many food additives and chemicals in the environment.

- Stay active. Exercise reduces stress. Stress has been shown to have a direct effect on the immune system by lowering its ability to fight disease. Start a walking program or join an exercise group.

After a relative's diagnosis of breast cancer, it is time to face the fear of being high risk and plan to take action. Talk to a healthcare profession if your family history has characteristics of hereditary cancer. Lifestyle changes to maintain a healthy body, along with early detection and screening, should assure that, if cancer occurs, it will be found early, when it can be treated most successfully.

Remember, "high risk" does not mean you will have cancer. It is only a yellow light, a caution light that allows you time to make wise decisions**.**

Additional Information:

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