

Washington Hospital Cancer Genetics Program

Most people know sunscreen can prevent melanoma and refusing to smoke can save your lungs, but there's nothing you can do about hereditary cancer risks.

Not true, says Dr. Vandana B. Sharma, a board-certified oncologist who heads Washington Hospital's new Cancer Genetics Program. In partnership with Stanford University Medical Center, the program offers genetic testing and counseling to people who may have certain cancer-causing genes.

"This program gives people information about whether or not they are at increased risk of developing cancer," explains Dr. Sharma. "That knowledge enables "carriers" to take measures that improve their chances of detecting, treating and even preventing some cancers."

For example, it's recommended that most people get colonoscopies every five years beginning at age 50. Carriers of the gene for Lynch Syndrome, however, have a 80 percent chance of developing colon cancer, often much earlier than usual. They might start screening at 25 and do it every year or two. By detecting and removing polyps early, colon cancer can be prevented.

Genetic testing can benefit other family members, as well. There is a 50 percent chance a child will



inherit gene mutations that can lead to cancer, says Dr. Sharma. That means siblings and children of a carrier should be tested to see if they, too, are affected.

The process starts with a risk assessment. Prime candidates for genetic testing include:

- Patients who contracted cancer before age 50
- Those with a strong family history (multiple individuals and multiple generations)
- People who have had 10 or more polyps.

"Doctors consider more than gender or type of cancer. More than half of women with the "breast cancer gene" develop the disease," notes Dr. Sharma. "However, they also have more incidence of ovarian cancer, too.

Men with the gene experience higher rates of prostate cancer, and pancreatic cancer is more common in both sexes."

Those are frightening statistics but, with genetic testing, the odds can be improved. For instance, MRIs, earlier and more frequent mammograms, medication, and preventive mastectomies can lower the odds of getting breast cancer. Similarly, removing the ovaries and fallopian tubes before age 40 can prevent ovarian cancer.

"In addition to testing, it's the counseling services we provide that makes this unique in the area," says Dr. Sharma. "This program brings outstanding, university-level care to our local community."

Most private insurers and Medicare cover genetic testing and counseling for high-risk members. GINA (Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act) prohibits health insurers from denying or charging more for coverage based on genetic information.

Should You Consider Genetic Testing?

The Washington Cancer Genetics Program is located at 2500 Mowry Avenue (Washington West), Suite 150 in Fremont.

Call (510) 608-1356 for more information.