Genetic Counselling Services

What is genetic counselling?

Genetic counselling provides an individual or a family with information and support regarding health concerns which may be inherited within their family.

Genes are pieces of DNA code that we inherit. There are a number of known breast cancer genes that have roles in *protecting us* against developing breast and ovarian cancer. We all have two copies of each gene - one inherited from each parent. If you inherit an abnormal copy of a breast cancer gene (a gene mutation, or faulty gene), this may mean you are at increased risk of breast and ovarian cancer. The most commonly known gene mutations for breast and ovarian cancer are called BRCA1 and BRCA2.

What is genetic testing?

Genetic testing means mapping out an individual's genes to identify if they have inherited a faulty gene from their mother or father.

What happens when someone is referred for genetic counselling?

The first step for the genetics department is to confirm that there is a faulty gene in your family. If you have a relative who has already had genetic testing, the geneticist will want to see a copy of the relative's genetic report from the centre where they had their test.

The doctor or the genetic counsellor will go through your family tree with you to identify who is at risk of inheriting the faulty gene in your family. The faulty gene would have been present in your family for many generations; it is not new within your family. It is only in recent years however, that technology has allowed us to identify who actually carries a faulty gene.

In most families it is easy to predict if the faulty gene came down through your mother's or your father's family because of the family history of breast, ovarian and some other rarer cancers. The only way to *prove* it however, is to test family members to see who has the faulty gene.

At your first appointment the doctor or counsellor will explain what the faulty gene is, how it is inherited, the associated cancer risks, and your risk of having the faulty gene along with your options for cancer screening or risk-reducing options. They will also discuss whether or not you *want* to have a test at this point in your life and how a positive or negative result may impact on your life and on relationships within the family. If you decide to have the test, results are given some weeks later at another appointment (usually face-to-face).

What if someone doesn't want genetic testing?

Not everyone who is at risk of having a faulty gene wants to have a predictive genetic test. Even if you or your relative doesn't want genetic testing it is still useful to know your options and have a chance to ask any questions. If you are at high risk of having a faulty gene you are still eligible for extra cancer surveillance, such as breast MRIs, even if you don't want testing.

How can genetic counselling services be accessed?

While it is preferable to have a referral from a doctor or specialist in order to access genetic counselling services, an appointment can usually be made without any referral. Health care interpreter services are also available.

**Much of the above information is adapted from an excellent resource from the UK that can be downloaded at : https://www.royalmarsden.nhs.uk/sites/default/files/files_trust/brca_0.pdf*

Clinical Genetics Services

Royal Prince Alfred Hospital
Department of Molecular and Clinical Genetics
Missenden Road,
Camperdown
Ph: (02) 9515 5080
Fax: (02) 9515 5490

St George Hospital
Clinical Genetics Service
Kogarah
Ph: (02) 9113 3635
Fax: (02) 9113 3694

The Sydney Children's Hospital
Department of Medical Genetics
High Street, Randwick
Ph: (02) 9382 1704
Fax: (02) 9382 1711

Liverpool Health Service
Clinical Genetics Department
Locked Bag 7103, Liverpool
Ph: (02) 9828 4588
Fax: (02) 8738 4650

Royal North Shore Hospital
Department of Clinical Genetics
PO Box 63, St Leonards
Ph: (02) 9926 6502
Fax: (02) 9926 6433

Newcastle Western Suburbs Hospital
Hunter Genetics
PO Box 84, Waratah
Ph: (02) 4985 3100
Fax: (02) 4985 3105

Westmead Hospital
Department of Genetic Medicine
Hawkesbury Road, Westmead
Ph: (20) 9845 9780
Fax: (02) 9845 9789

Nepean Hospital
Clinical Genetics Department
PO Box 63, Penrith
Ph: (02) 4734 3362
Fax: (02) 4734 2561