

What should I do if I am worried about my family history of cancer?

Find out and record:

- Who in your family has developed cancer
- At what age they developed cancer
- What type of cancer(s) they developed
- Which family members are not affected by cancer

Talk to your doctor to find out if your family history of cancer is of concern. If necessary, your doctor may refer you to a family cancer clinic or genetic counselling service. Your family history of cancer may change over time. It is important to keep your doctor updated about any new cancers in your family.

For more information on how to collect a family history visit www.genetics.edu.au

Family cancer and genetic counselling services

These services give people information about their chance of developing cancer based on their family history. These services also provide information on ways to reduce the chance of cancer developing and methods of detecting it sooner. Sometimes genetic testing is possible, but is only considered after the advantages and disadvantages of testing have been discussed with you.

For more information about family cancer and genetic counselling services you can contact your general practitioner, The Cancer Council NSW Helpline on 13 11 20 or call NSW Health's Centre for Genetics Education on (02) 9926 7324 or visit their website at www.genetics.edu.au.

What if I have a family history of cancer?



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Cancer is common - many people have someone in their family who has (or had) cancer. It is important to know that only a very small percentage of certain cancers (up to 5%) are due to an inherited faulty gene.

Cancer can occur in more than one person in the family for different reasons, including:

- just by chance (mostly the case)
- family members having similar environmental and lifestyle influences (eg: too much sun or smoking)
- there is an inherited faulty gene in the family causing an increased chance of cancer (uncommon).

Faulty genes and cancer

Our bodies are made up of billions of cells. These cells contain a copy of the genetic plan for our growth, development and health. This genetic plan comes in the form of genes which we inherit from our parents.

Everyone has some faulty genes. Sometimes they have been inherited from our parents. Faults in genes can also build up during our life as we age. Faulty genes usually do not cause any problems.

Sometimes our faulty genes cause, or make us more prone to, particular health problems such as cancer. Over the last 10 years, scientists have made some important discoveries about the role faulty genes play in cancer.

What types of cancer can be due to an inherited faulty gene?

It is thought that up to 5% (1 in 20) of the following types of cancer may involve an inherited faulty gene.

- Bowel cancer
- Breast and ovarian cancer
- Melanoma

In rare cases, there may be a number of people in a family who develop less common cancers in a pattern which suggests an inherited faulty gene is present. It is important to look at all the different types of cancer that occur in the family.

How can I tell if my family history of cancer is of concern?

Look at the family history on both your father's and your mother's side of the family. The clues that cancers in your family may be due to an inherited faulty gene include:

a) The number of blood relatives who have developed cancer.

The greater the number of blood relatives who have developed cancer (in particular breast, ovarian and/or bowel cancer), the more likely it is that the cancer is due to an inherited faulty gene.

b) The ages at which cancers develop in blood relatives*.

The younger people are when they develop cancer the more likely it is to be due to inherited genetic factors.

c) The pattern of cancer in the family.

The types of cancer and who in the family has developed cancer are important considerations. In some families, there are a number of blood relatives who develop the same type of cancer such as breast cancer or bowel cancer. In other families, there are particular combinations of cancers running in the family such as breast and ovarian cancer or bowel and cancer of the uterus. This happens because some faulty genes can increase the chance of developing more than one type of cancer.

The more of these clues that are present, the more likely it is that there is an inherited faulty gene in your family causing a higher than usual chance of cancer. However it is not definite.

Even if a faulty gene causing an increased chance of cancer is being passed down through your family, it does not mean that you will definitely have inherited this faulty gene.

It is important to know that some people who inherit a faulty gene which causes an increased chance of cancer, will never go on to develop cancer.

* Blood relatives: related by blood, not marriage.