

## Family History

### Gathering Information About Cancer

Your genetic counselor or doctor may ask you to gather information about your family history of cancer. Your family history can help identify:

- Your chances of having a genetic risk of cancer that is passed down in families.
- Which family members may benefit from genetic testing or be at a higher risk for cancer.
- If you and your family members will need to follow different cancer prevention and screening guidelines.

Use the information below as a guide to gather important family details. The more accurate the family history, the more accurate your own assessment will be.

### Tips for Gathering Information

- Talk with your relatives.
  - Older relatives are often good sources for this information.
  - Holiday gatherings can be a good time to discuss and update family history information.
- Gather hospital records or death certificates.
  - Pathology reports are the medical records that list a person's type of cancer.
  - Hospitals can release records directly to the patient. If your relative has passed away, they can release them to the next of kin, who are the closest relative(s) entitled to the deceased individual's property.
  - A county clerk's office or state health department should have death certificates on file.

### Family Pedigree

Your genetic counselor will record your family history information on a drawing of your family tree, also called a pedigree. Pedigrees show:

- Your relatives, including:
  - First degree: parents, brothers, sisters, children.
  - Second degree: nieces, nephews, aunts, uncles, grandparents.
  - Third degree: cousins, great aunts, great uncles, great-grandparents.
- Living and deceased people on both sides of the family.
- Relatives who had cancer and those that have **not** had cancer.
- The current age of each relative or their age at death.
- Any cancer diagnoses and age at diagnosis. It is important to know what organ the cancer started in and whether the relative may have had more than one cancer.
- The country or countries that your ancestors originally came from.
- Any ethnic groups you and your ancestors belong to, such as Ashkenazi Jewish ancestry.

It may also be helpful to know if:

- Anyone in your family has had genetic testing for inherited cancers. Bring a copy of your relatives' genetic testing results, if possible. If this is not possible, try to find out what year this testing was done, what the results were and whether the testing was done on their tumor or through a blood or saliva test.
- You have a family history of breast cancer. If so, ask:
  - Did any family members have cancer in both breasts?
  - Did family members have breast cancer before or after menopause or age 50?
  - Which family members have had mammograms or breast MRIs?
- You have a family history of cervical, ovarian or uterine cancer. If so, ask:
  - Did any family members have a hysterectomy to remove their uterus? If so, at what age? Were their ovaries also removed?
- You have a family history of colon cancer. If so, ask:
  - Which family members have had colonoscopies?
  - Have any family members had polyps? If so, how many polyps in total? Were the polyps pre-cancerous?
  - If someone had polyps removed, are there pathology reports that list the type of polyps?

## Possible Challenges

- Some people do not know or may have lost touch with an entire side of the family.
  - This is relatively common. Try not to get discouraged.
  - Even limited information is helpful.
- Relatives may be hesitant to share personal information.
  - It may help to explain why you are gathering this information. Offer to share the information that you discover about your family history.
  - Try to listen and ask questions without judgment.
  - Some relatives may choose to keep their health information private. If they do not want to share, respect their privacy.
- It is easy to confuse the difference between having more than one unrelated cancer and having a cancer that has spread or metastasized. For example, if a person had breast cancer that spread to their lungs, this person just had breast cancer. This is different from a person who had breast cancer and then had a lung cancer diagnosis unrelated to their breast cancer.

Your doctor and genetic counselor will still be able to estimate your chances of having a genetic form of cancer, even if you cannot get all the details. A little information is better than none.