

Should You Have BRCA Gene Testing?



Knowing if you're at high risk for a disease can empower you to make informed health decisions. With cancer, that means learning more about your BRCA genes. They may determine your risk of developing certain types of cancer.

What are BRCA genes?

BRCA1 and BRCA2 are human genes that make proteins that repair damaged DNA. They ensure a cell's genetic material is stable. This means the proteins can help prevent cancer from developing. But, when mutations occur in these genes, they can raise someone's risk of these:

- Breast cancer
- Ovarian cancer
- Other types of cancer

To understand your risk, you can have a test done to see if your BRCA genes have any changes.

Is BRCA testing right for me?

Anyone can carry a BRCA gene mutation. But BRCA testing may be a good idea if you have any of these:

- A family history of breast or ovarian cancer
- A family member who developed cancer at a young age
- Many close relatives who have had cancer
- Ashkenazi Jewish heritage
- Has a known family history of BRCA gene mutation

A person born with a uterus may want the test if they have had any of these:

- Breast cancer at a young age (age 50 or younger)
- Triple-negative breast cancer
- A second breast cancer
- Ovarian cancer
- Pancreatic cancer

A person born with a penis may want the test if they have had any of these:

- Metastatic prostate cancer
- Breast cancer
- Pancreatic cancer

Before getting tested

Choosing BRCA gene testing is a complex decision. Here are some important things to think about:

- **Your family's medical history, including cancer.** Speak with a genetic counselor. They'll help you examine the risks and benefits of testing.
- **Your emotional readiness.** The results of BRCA gene testing can bring about a range of emotions. You may feel relief, anxiety, or fear.
- **Insurance coverage and cost.** Genetic testing can be expensive. Insurance coverage varies. Find out the possible out-of-pocket costs.
- **The effect on family members.** Your test results may affect your close relatives. Talk about testing with your family. They may or may not want to get tested or know your results.

How is the test done?

Genetic counseling is an important part of the testing process. The counselor can help you manage the emotional part of genetic testing. They will talk with you about the limitations of the test, and possible results.

To do the test, you give a blood or saliva sample. The sample should go to a certified lab. Lab technicians will analyze it to find any mutations in the BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes.

After the test

If your BRCA gene test results show that you have a mutation, it doesn't mean you will get cancer. It only suggests that your risk is higher than average. If you have a BRCA mutation, talk with your healthcare team. They can help you develop a plan to lower your cancer risk. They will talk with you about breast cancer screening. They may advise you to:

- Have cancer screenings more often
- Take medicine to reduce your risk of breast cancer
- Have a preventive surgery

If you don't have a BRCA gene mutation, it doesn't mean that you can't get cancer. Get regular cancer screenings. Keep a healthy lifestyle. These can cut your risk of cancer.

The power of knowing

Knowing your BRCA gene status can be empowering. It lets you take charge of your health and make informed decisions. Talk with your healthcare team about your choices and concerns. Educate yourself about the latest advances in cancer research, prevention, and treatment. Work on having a strong support network of friends, family, and healthcare providers.

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