VALLEYHEALTH

Genetic Testing in Women's Health: What to Know

Genetic testing looks at specific genes to help identify certain health risks. In women's health, it is often used for two main reasons: pregnancy-related screening and cancer risk.

Today, genetic testing is usually done with a blood test. Before testing, patients typically receive counseling so they understand what the test can and cannot tell them.

Genetic Testing and Cancer Risk

Cancer-related genetic testing looks for gene changes that may raise the risk of certain cancers. One well-known example is the **BRCA gene,** which is linked to a higher risk of breast and ovarian cancer.

Testing may also be considered when there is concern about other cancers, including uterine or colon cancer. The goal is not to predict the future with certainty, but to better understand risk.

Who Should Consider Genetic Testing?

Genetic testing is most often recommended for people with an increased risk based on personal or family history. This may include someone who has had:

- Breast cancer
- Ovarian cancer
- Uterine cancer
- Colon cancer

It may also be appropriate for women with a family history of these cancers, especially if relatives were diagnosed at younger ages or multiple family members were affected.

What Your Results Can Tell You

A genetic test result helps show whether your risk is higher, lower, or unchanged based on the genes tested. A negative result does **not** mean you will never develop cancer. A positive result does **not** mean you will definitely develop cancer.

Instead, results help guide next steps. Depending on your risk, your provider may recommend closer screening or other ways to reduce risk.

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How Results May Change Your Care

For breast cancer risk, some patients may alternate mammograms with breast MRIs so screening happens about every six months. For ovarian cancer risk, ultrasound may be recommended.

If someone has a higher risk of colon cancer, colonoscopies may start earlier and happen more often. In some cases, women with very high ovarian cancer risk may discuss preventive surgery as an option.

What If You Do Not Have a Family History?

Some women may still choose genetic testing even without a strong family history. Testing is available in many cases, but insurance may not cover it if you do not meet certain risk criteria.

Your provider can help explain whether testing makes sense and what costs or coverage questions to consider.

Know Your Family History

If you are concerned about inherited cancer risk, start by gathering family history. Try to learn:

- Which relatives had cancer
- What type of cancer they had
- How old they were when diagnosed

Bring this information to your OB/GYN or primary care provider. These details can help determine whether genetic testing may be appropriate.

Genetic testing can help women better understand their health risks and make more informed decisions about care. If you have a personal or family history of breast, ovarian, uterine, or colon cancer, Valley Health can help you decide whether testing may be right for you.

To learn more or schedule a visit, contact Valley Health or visit valleyhealth.org.