Familial Breast Cancer

LOW RISK

Breast cancer is a common cancer, affecting 1 in 12 individuals at some point in their lifetime. It is not uncommon to see more than one woman in a family with breast cancer but most, 90-95%, is sporadic and occurs by chance. It is likely that only 5-10% of the disease occurs because of an inherited predisposition, and it is in these families where there may be an increased risk to relatives.

In families where there is an inherited predisposition, cancer tends to occur at a younger age; the same type of cancer may affect several family members; there may be a combination of breast and ovarian cancer or an individual may have bilateral breast cancer. There is no easy way at present to be sure whether cancer in a family is genetic or not, and we are mainly guided by the number of people in the family who have had cancer, and at what ages it developed.

From your family history, we would consider you to be at low added risk of developing breast cancer. This is because there are only 1 or 2 women affected in your family, and they have been affected at ages in keeping with the population risks of breast cancer rather than with familial cancer, or they are on different sides of the family. Thus the chance that there is a predisposition gene in your family to explain this is low. It is more likely that what has happened is due to chance. Alternatively, it may be that there are more women affected in your family, but that they are rather distantly related to you and so the chance that you would also carry an altered gene is low.

This means that your own risk of developing breast cancer is increased only a little, if at all. Because of this, we would not normally suggest you need any additional breast screening, but would encourage you to take part in the NHS Breast Screening Programme which is currently offered from age 50. Before that, all we would suggest is breast awareness, and reporting anything worrying to your GP. We would also suggest you get back in touch with the genetics department should there be any change in your family history.

You may have wondered whether a genetic test was possible in your family, even though we consider it unlikely there is a predisposition gene. If there was a test which could prove the breast cancer was not genetic, this might be helpful even in low risk families. Unfortunately this is not possible. At present there are 2 genes known which can cause a predisposition to breast cancer. These are BRCA1 and BRCA2. However, we know that these are not the only genes which can cause familial breast cancer. Even if we did test your family for these 2 genes, it is not in fact possible to prove that breast cancer is not genetic as there are a number of other breast cancer genes which have not yet been found and for which we cannot test. There is a lot of research into this area at present and this situation may change in the future.

Possible protective factors are not yet fully understood, but having children young and breast-feeding may be protective. A diet high in fresh fruit and vegetables and not too much fat, regular exercise, moderate alcohol and avoiding obesity are all associated with lower risks of cancer. Some women who do all these things still get cancer so there is no way of being certain of avoiding the disease.

Hormone replacement (HRT) is thought to slightly increase the risk of breast cancer after 5 years’ use, but this risk disappears 5 years after stopping, and has to be set against the potential benefits. The oral contraceptive pill may also increase risks very slightly, but for many women the benefits (which include a reduction in the risk of ovarian cancer) may well outweigh the small additional risk.
If you have any questions or you would like an appointment to discuss any of the points raised please contact:

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