Familial Bowel Cancer

LOW RISK

Cancer is a common disease that affects 1 in 3 individuals. Bowel cancer is also fairly common, affecting 1 in 25 people. It is not uncommon to see more than one person in a family with bowel 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 mainly 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 bowel cancer with other cancers such as womb or ovary; and an individual may have more than one bowel tumour. 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 bowel cancer. This is because there are only 1 or 2 people affected in your family, and they have been affected at ages in keeping with the population risks of bowel 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, there may be more people affected, but they are only distantly related to you.

This means that your own risk of developing bowel cancer is increased only a little, if at all. Because of this, we would not normally suggest you need any bowel screening, other than the screening offered to the whole population, but would encourage you to report any worrying symptoms 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 bowel cancer was not genetic, this might be helpful even in low risk families. Unfortunately this is not possible. At present there are at least 5 genes known which can cause a predisposition to bowel cancer. Even if we tested your family for all these genes, it would not in fact be possible to prove that the bowel cancer was not genetic as we know there are a number of other bowel cancer genes which have not yet been found and for which we cannot test.

Possible protective factors are not yet fully understood, but a diet high in fresh fruit, vegetables and fibre without too much fat, regular exercise, moderate alcohol and avoiding smoking are all associated with lower risks of cancer. Some people who do all these things still get cancer so there is no way of being certain of avoiding the disease.

There is research ongoing looking at other factors in the diet, or drugs, which might reduce the risk of bowel cancer, and the results of these should be available over the next few years.

If you have any questions or you would like an appointment to discuss any of the points raised please contact:

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Low Risk Families

Information Leaflet