

Breast Cancer Genes

An April 4 Fast Forward article sheds light on the issue of counseling and testing for breast cancer among Jewish women, but it is important to point out that inherited breast cancer is due to alterations not in "the BRCA gene," as reported, but rather in at least two genes, BRCA 1 and BRCA 2 ("The BRCA Gene: A Positive Test, A Personal Choice").

Ashkenazic Jewish women are more likely to carry a mutated gene than women in the general population, but much to the surprise of many women, most breast cancers are not inherited. In fact, 90%-95% of breast cancers are sporadic.

Jewish women should become familiar with their family history, both on their maternal and paternal sides. Indications in the personal and family history can be suggestive of an inherited predisposition to breast and other cancers, which occur 5%-10% of the time.

Most importantly, the genetics community has recommended that since one in 40 Ashkenazic Jewish individuals carries a BRCA mutation, every Ashkenazic Jewish woman with a diagnosis of breast or ovarian cancer have genetic testing, regardless of family history.

Genetic analysis is a process that involves risk assessment, and genetic counseling prior to and after actual testing can assist women in their quest for information and assessment, as well as help them to make informed personal choices.

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