Do Patients Need Genetic Counseling by a Certified Provider?

The cancer genetic counseling and testing process, including which test to order and interpreting the results correctly, can be quite complex. Studies have shown a high rate of genetic test result misinterpretation among providers who do not specialize in this area. Genetic testing options are also rapidly expanding with many laboratories now offering multi-gene panel testing to look at a variety of genes associated with hereditary cancer. There are both benefits and challenges to genetic testing and it is important to carefully weigh the risks and benefits of testing. Our certified genetic counselors can provide personalized risk assessments and genetic counseling, coordinate genetic testing if appropriate and provide long term follow up.

Benefits of meeting with a certified genetic counselor:

1. There are many different types of testing available. Our certified genetic counselors will identify the appropriate test to be ordered. For example, individuals from a family with a known mutation or patients of Jewish ancestry, should be offered targeted testing first. The cost differential to patients and the insurer is often thousands of dollars.

2. Our certified genetic counselors will provide thorough informed consent, result interpretation and appropriate disclosure as well as long term follow-up.

3. The subtly of pathology must be used in risk assessment and result interpretation. Specific pathology can make the cancers in a family more or less likely to be hereditary. Our genetic counselors will review pathology reports to provide accurate risk assessments and testing recommendations.

4. Our genetic counselors are trained in interpreting genetic test results. Misinterpretation of results is the greatest risk of genetic testing and is common among providers not trained in this area.\(^1\) Patients with negative results are of greatest concern because these results are not straightforward and need to be interpreted in context of a patient’s personal and family history.

5. At minimum, 5-10% of results from genetic testing reveal a variant of uncertain significance. These results require the most complex interpretation, utilizing specially designed algorithms in conjunction with current personal and family history and often additional testing.

6. Our genetic counselors will provide information or offer enrollment in research studies for patients that they may benefit from these studies.

7. Our genetic counselors can identify patients or family members that should be offered DNA banking. This is often critical to informative testing in other family members.
8. Our genetic counselors will consider a patient’s insurance information when selecting testing laboratories to use.

As genetic testing options grow at expansive rates, the maintenance of high standards for genetic counseling, informed consent and accurate result interpretation will be paramount in reducing potential risks and maximizing the benefits of this technology.

Reference: