

Genetic Counseling



A Patient's Perspective: GI Cancer Risk

After being diagnosed with colon cancer and going through surgery and the process of recovery, the last thing I wanted to talk about was the possibility of this being inherited from my own family. I was 35 years old, single, and finally gaining confidence in my career. "I already have cancer, what use is genetic counseling at this stage in the game anyway?" Following my doctor's recommendations, I called to at least hear what the genetic counselor had to say. I was skeptical at best.

I had not really thought much about my family history until now. Yes, my dad was diagnosed with colon cancer in his mid 50s, and his sister had some kind of 'gynecologic cancer' ...uterine cancer, I think, in her early 40s, but there wasn't much beyond that. I asked the counselor how this program could be helpful to me at this point in time. We discussed the possibility of a genetic syndrome (clustering of cancers) called Lynch syndrome and how it often can lead to family histories of early onset colon cancer, uterine and ovarian cancer, and other less commonly seen cancers like stomach, and urinary tract. I had no idea that I could potentially be at risk for cancers in other parts of the body.

She also explained to me why I was such a good candidate to pursue the cancer genetics evaluation and its importance not only for me, but for my siblings, nieces, nephews, and the entire father's side of the family. What surprised me more was how helpful she was in the questions that were really burning a hole inside of me. How did it feel to be diagnosed with colon cancer so young? How was it affecting my job and my interactions at work? And most importantly, how was my cancer diagnosis going to affect my future relationships and dating experiences? What normal woman would ever wish to end up with a man who likely puts their future children at risk to develop cancer?

After my evaluation, my genetic counselor connected me with a patient who was diagnosed around the same age as myself. It was extremely helpful to talk with someone that had walked a few steps down a similar path and to see them doing so well. I also chose to talk with a psychologist about some of the relationship issues that were weighing heavily on my mind.

As it turns out, my family was found to have Lynch syndrome. Now, every year, I have a few cancer screenings that I do differently from the average person including annual upper and lower endoscopies to screen for polyps. Because we identified that reason for the cancer in my dad's side of the family, my relatives were able to pursue genetic testing to see if they, too, need to follow a specific cancer screening regimen. In the end, I learned a lot about the strength that lives within me and I hope someday I can pass that onto another person. And did I mention, I have a date next week?

For more information about Genetic Counseling, please contact Beth Souders, MS, CGC, at 215.829.6528 or visit PennMedicine.org/Karnell.