

Gene testing for breast cancer risk available at War Memorial Hospital

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(SAULT STE MARIE) Women with multiple instances of breast or ovarian cancer in their family history can obtain genetic testing for mutations in the BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes right here in Sault Ste. Marie.

This diagnostic tool received national attention because of actress Angelina Jolie's high-profile experience earlier this year, but one doesn't have to be a superstar to find out if her risk of developing breast or ovarian cancer is higher than normal.

Paula Rechner, M.D., a surgeon with Advanced Surgical Care, performs biopsies, lumpectomies, and other procedures related to breast cancer and is an advocate for genetic testing in certain situations.

"Testing has evolved and become a more effective way for physicians to evaluate a woman's level of risk, which is greatly increased if gene mutation is discovered. The information obtained allows a woman and her doctor to make more informed decisions about preventative steps or future treatment," Rechner explained.

The BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes produce tumor-suppressing proteins, according to the National Cancer Institute. Those proteins, they explain, help repair damaged DNA and make cells more stable. If the BRCA genes are mutated, that DNA may not be repaired. The NCI says that specific inherited mutations increase the risk of female breast and ovarian cancer and also have been associated with risk in other types of cancer.

Testing is pretty simple from the patient's perspective. Either a blood or saliva sample is sent for laboratory analysis. A variety of tests are available and can check for mutations in both genes.

Rechner said these gene mutations are relatively rare, so genetic testing isn't recommended for everyone. But if the patient's family history suggests the possibility of BRCA1 or BRCA2 mutation, it's an effective tool.

"As physicians, we look for certain patterns. If a patient has had multiple breast or ovarian cancers in the family or if one member of that family has had multiple instances of breast and/or ovarian cancer, genetic testing can be informative," the doctor explained.

Further information is available by calling Advanced Surgical Care at (906) 253-9970.

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