

Hidden risks

Genes can influence your overall health

BY SARAH NORLAND
SPECIAL WRITER

When doctors diagnosed Liz Campana's daughter, Rachel, with a tumor-growing disorder called neurofibromatosis, she was surprised. After all, her daughter looked perfectly healthy.

But you can't always see the influence genes play on overall health.

There are several ways genes impact health. Rachel's disorder was due to spontaneous mutation. That means the 4-year-old did not inherit the disease from either parent; something abnormal occurred in her genes before birth.

Genetic disorders also can be passed generation to generation, the same way eye or hair color can be inherited. Those diagnosed with neurofibromatosis, such as Rachel, will have a 50 percent chance of passing it to their children.

Other health disorders are multifactorial, meaning genetic and nongenetic factors play a role. Heart disease is an example. Heart disease tends to run in families, but a poor diet, smoking or lack of exercise can play a dramatic role in its onset. Other common multifactorial health problems include strokes, diabetes and most cancers.

With so much riding on traits you can't control, what's the point of knowing whether you may be at risk for an illness?

Lifestyle changes can help prevent the

onset of multifactorial diseases. But even when there are no changes that can help, knowledge of a predisposition can be important, experts say.

Dr. Zio Bartolomeo, a family practitioner, says knowing your family health history often is vital when physicians diagnose or treat.

"If you came in and says your dad died at age 40 of colon cancer, I'm not going to treat you like any other person," he says. "I would treat you much more aggressively."

Heidi Thompson, a community outreach learning specialist, says taking proactive health measures is important for everyone.

"You have to be a partner in your own health care," she says. She recommends mapping your family history.

First, decide which relatives to study. Typically, you will want to go at least two generations back. Information about first-degree relatives — grandparents, parents and siblings — should be top priority.

"Often, the more close the family member is, the more significant it becomes," says Thompson.

According to the American Cancer Society, about 5 percent to 10 percent of breast cancer cases are hereditary. Having one first-degree relative with breast cancer approximately doubles a woman's risk of occurrence, and having two first-

degree relatives increase the risk five-fold.

For men, prostate cancer is a common threat.

The National Prostate Cancer forum reports that one in nine men will develop prostate cancer in his lifetime. Having a father or brother with prostate cancer doubles a man's risk of developing this disease.

Diabetes can present a risk to families. According to the American Diabetes Association, if you are a man with Type 1 diabetes, the odds of your child getting diabetes are one in 17. If you are a woman with diabetes and your child was born before you were 25, your child's risk is one in 25. If you and your partner have Type 1 diabetes, your child's risk can be as high as one in four.

Other illnesses that travel from generation to generation include cardiac disease, ovarian cancer, osteoporosis, hypertension, colon cancer, Alzheimer's disease, asthma and high blood pressure.

Mental health also has strong familial components. Chemical dependency, alcoholism, depression, eating disorders and schizophrenia commonly run in families.

In addition to tracking which relative has a particular condition, things to note that may help your physician include age of onset and whether any lifestyle factors may have contributed.

As the American Cancer Society has



Gene factor: Though her tumor-growing disease can be genetic, a nongenetic mutation caused Rachel Campana's neurofibromatosis.

observed, people with relatives who developed breast cancer in their early 20s carry a greater risk than those with affected relatives in their 80s.

Likewise, relatives with lung cancer who were heavy smokers are not as significant as those who maintained healthful habits.

It's not always easy to seek health information from family members, but with all the benefits that come with knowing whether one should undergo early screening or make lifestyle changes, it's worth the effort.



Dr. Ellen Mady

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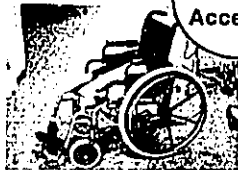
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