

What is Genetic Counseling?

Your doctor may ask you to consult with a genetic counselor.

What is a Genetic Counselor?

A genetic counselor is a health professional with a graduate degree and expertise in the areas of medical genetics and counseling. Most counselors have a background in biology, genetics, nursing, psychology, public health or social work.

What Happens During a Genetic Counseling Session?

During a genetic counseling session at MD Anderson Cancer Center at Cooper, the genetic counselor will review your medical history and ask questions about your family history of cancer and sometimes other medical conditions. He or she will use this information to estimate the chance you could have an inherited condition that increases your risk for cancer. In some cases, genetic testing may be discussed.

The genetic counselor will also explain how genetics and family history can affect cancer risks. He or she will help you to understand your own risk and to make decisions that are best for you. If you are found to be at increased risk for cancer, for example, the genetic counselor can explain more aggressive cancer screening and prevention options that are available.

Why Should I Consider Genetic Counseling?

You should consider seeing a genetic counselor for a cancer risk assessment if you have a personal and/or family history of hereditary cancer, have breast or ovarian cancer with Ashkenazi Jewish ancestry (descendants from Eastern or Central Europe) or breast or ovarian cancer with polyposis (multiple polyps in the colon, stomach or small intestine).

Hereditary cancers typically differ from non-hereditary cancers in the following ways:

- The cancer is usually diagnosed in younger people, often before age 50.
- Multiple relatives from the same side of the family have identical or related types of cancer.
- The cancer is more likely to develop in multiple locations in the body.
- The cancer may be a rare form, such as male breast cancer, retinoblastoma, medullary thyroid or pheochromocytoma and paraganglioma.
- A family member may already be diagnosed with a hereditary cancer syndrome.

How Do I Make an Appointment for Genetic Counseling at MD Anderson Cancer Center at Cooper?

Patients should first discuss their personal and family history with their doctor to determine if genetic counseling is appropriate.

For any questions or to schedule a session, contact Vicki Kay Atkinson, coordinator, Genetics, High Risk and Survivorship Program, MD Anderson Cancer Center at Cooper, at 856-735-6190.