

Ask the doctor May 2019

Not having a family history of breast cancer doesn't mean you're not at risk:

It seems impossible to keep up with the recent changes in determining a woman's risk of developing breast cancer. Until recently, the most important question we ask women about risk was, do you have a family history of breast or ovarian cancer? For most women the answer was no, and there was no further discussion about risk.

When women who had no family history did develop a breast cancer, we referred to it as a "spontaneous cancer" which simply meant we had no idea what caused it.

The discussion of risk is not so simple as we thought. There are some women who have no known family history of breast cancer, but carry a genetic mutation. This mutation can put them at an 85% lifetime risk of developing breast cancer.

Not only are they at high risk of developing both breast and ovarian cancer, they also have a 50% chance of passing their mutation on to each child.

Identifying these high-risk women with no family history of breast cancer is challenging, but progress is being made. The cost of screening for the two major mutations, BRCA 1 and 2 is now in the range of 250 dollars. With improvements in technology and competition in the marketplace, the cost will predictably continue to drop in the future.

A recent report from NBC news highlights the issues of what can happen when someone decides to pay out-of-pocket for genetic screening. It provides a glimpse into the future and is well worth watching. To view the short news clip just link to: <http://www.nbcnews.com/nightly-news/video/how-genetic-tests-can-reveal-a-hidden-family-history-of-cancer-448472131848>