BRING YOUR brave.

# Talking with your family about hereditary breast and ovarian cancer (HBOC)

**The first step toward protecting yourself and your loved ones**

## What is hereditary breast and ovarian cancer?

Each year, more than 250,000 women and about 2,300 men in the United States learn that they have breast cancer, and nearly 20,000 women find out that they have ovarian cancer. Most of these cancers occur by chance or because of risk factors like smoking. But some are hereditary, meaning that they are caused by genetic changes (called mutations) which are passed down in families. Learning about your family's history of cancer is the first step toward understanding your own risk.

## How do I start the conversation?

The first step is to collect any history of cancer in your family and share this information with your doctor. When collecting your family history, include your biological parents, sisters, brothers, children, grandparents, aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews. List any cancers that each relative had and at what age he or she was diagnosed. Remember that breast and ovarian cancer can be inherited from either your mother's or father's side of the family.

## When should I talk to my family about their own risk?

If your family history shows that you may be at higher risk for hereditary breast and ovarian cancer (HBOC), your doctor may refer you for genetic counseling and testing. At that time, you may want to urge family members to talk to their own doctors about counseling or even invite them to join your conversation with a genetic counselor.

If, after genetic testing, you are diagnosed with HBOC, the conversation with your family is even more important. The diagnosis means you carry one or more genetic mutations that increase your cancer risk. And this means your parents, children, sisters, and brothers each have a 50% chance of carrying the same genetic mutation. While this may not be the easiest news to share, a frank conversation with family members is the best way to protect them.

# What if **my family** doesn't want to talk about HBOC?

All families are different. For some, illness is hard to talk about. Others are comfortable discussing it at the dinner table. Only you can determine the right setting and the right way to approach the conversation. A few tips:

- **Focus on the fact that information is power. Knowing you might have a hereditary condition can be scary, but if you know, you can take steps to protect yourself and the people you love.**
- **Stress that discussing your family history makes all of you more empowered to manage your health.**
- **Assure them that genetic counseling and testing is a personal decision. If they decide to talk to a genetic counselor, they'll learn about the pros and cons of testing and the health care choices available based on the results.**

Remember that everyone needs to make their own choice about genetic counseling and testing, whether or not you agree with the decision. If family members don't want to talk about HBOC or get tested for it, respect their wishes. Let them know you are available if they have questions and share other ways to find information if they are interested.

## TALKING TO CHILDREN about HBOC

**Children have a 50% chance of inheriting HBOC, so at some point they should know about your diagnosis. But when you decide to tell them and how much you share depend on your child's age and maturity. Take some time to process your own emotions before talking to your child, so you can be calm and reassuring. Know that they might be fearful about what will happen to both you and themselves, and emphasize that knowing the information will help you manage your health better.**

# What if I am the one **struggling** to have the conversation?

**Some people worry about sharing a diagnosis because they don't want to be the bearer of bad news. Or they fear not being able to answer tough questions. A few options to consider:**

1. Invite family members to attend doctor's appointments with you and ask questions. Some may already know about the family history, but not understand what it means for them or what they can do to take control of their own health.
2. Ask certain family members to help you have conversations with others.
3. Decide which conversations to have one-on-one or in a group setting—and how much information to share—based on how well you know family members and their comfort level discussing personal or health issues.

**Remember, everyone feels differently about discussing their health. You are doing the right thing, no matter how others react.**

# Which **family members** should I talk to?

**If you are diagnosed with HBOC, your parents, siblings, and children are most likely to share that diagnosis. Other blood relatives such as aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, and cousins are also more likely to have the condition. Your health care provider or genetic counselor can help you figure out who would benefit most from sharing your diagnosis.**

# What **information** should you share?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, along with the National Association of Chronic Disease Directors, have resources to help families understand and talk about HBOC. Visit conversationsaboutcancer.org/provider/hboc to access:

- **Fact sheet: Understanding risk factors for hereditary breast and ovarian cancer (HBOC)**
- **Fact sheet: Screening for hereditary breast and ovarian cancer (HBOC)**
- **Fact sheet: Preventive options for individuals diagnosed with BRCA1 or BRCA2 mutations**
- **Sample letter to family members if you are diagnosed with HBOC**
- **Other resources, including videos, conversation simulations, and more**

You can also use this resource (link: https://phgkb.cdc.gov/FHH/html/) to compile your family history. Then, share your family history and any genetic test results with other family members in order to help their own healthcare providers better tailor testing and care.

# Additional **tools**

**For additional tools and resources, including those listed below, please visit: conversationsaboutcancer.org/provider/hboc**

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