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At-Home Genetic Test Reveals Risk Of Developing Common Diseases

By Kate Merrill, WBZ-TV

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BOSTON (CBS) – For 15 years Kristen Whitaker endured constant [stomach pains](#) . And then her doctor suggested she take an at-home genetics test. “I wasn’t expecting to find out anything actionable that would change my life the way that it did,” says the Wellesley mom. The test revealed Kristen likely had an allergy to wheat and she was never nervous about exploring her own DNA. “I don’t like surprises,” she says. “So, I wanted to know everything that I could know especially when it has to do with my own health.”

Advances in technology have made genome [testing](#) more affordable and more accurate providing a treasure-trove of personal genetic information. Seven years ago customers using the company “[23andMe](#)” had access to 14 genetic markers at a cost of \$1,000. Now, for \$100 anyone can unlock the secrets of 250 health and trait genes.

“The scale of the genome is like going into outer space,” says Dr. Robert Green a medical geneticist at Brigham and Women’s Hospital. Dr. Green is studying the long-term benefits of genome testing. “Theoretically, you get risk variants that will tell you a little bit about your risk of developing a common disease.” [Common diseases](#) like diabetes, Alzheimer’s, heart disease, breast cancer, and prostate cancer.

“It’s controversial because right now... there are other things, like with diabetes, if you’re overweight that may be much more predictive of whether you’re going to get diabetes than the genes that we know about,” explains Dr. Green. And for other diseases, like Alzheimer’s, there may be little or nothing a person can do after finding out they’re at an increased risk. It’s also controversial when it comes to kids.

The American Academy of Pediatrics discourages genetic testing in healthy kids since there is likely no treatment at that early age for diseases they might experience later in life.

“We don’t know it yet if there’s a medical payoff,” says Dr. Green. But for Kristen, the payoff was immediate for herself and her family. She had all three of her kids tested for celiac disease and her 5-year-old daughter, Reagan, tested positive. She had been sick for a year before the diagnosis and is now thriving. “When we took the wheat out she was a different child. It’s amazing that that simple test did so much for our family,” says Kristen.