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Angelina Jolie's Announcement Spurs Interest in Genetic Testing

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Experts say genetic testing is a science that continues to evolve (Published Sunday, Jan. 26, 2014)

(NECN: Jennifer Eagan) - Genetic testing is a science that continues to evolve.

Whether or not you take a genetic test, as Angelina Jolie did, is entirely up to you. It often comes up for those with a history of cancer in their family.

"It's definitely as woman approach the age that their mothers were or their aunts were it becomes more and more real to them," said Dr. Huma Rana, a geneticist at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute.

The first step for patients meeting with geneticists like Dr. Rana is to examine their family history.

"Their primary care physicians send them to us to do a risk assessment and to really take a detailed three generation family history accessing for cancers associated with hereditary breast and ovarian cancer," said Dr. Rana.

For many patients, the possible impact the results of a genetic test could have on insurance is top of mind. But Dr. Rana says the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act (GINA) protects patients from losing coverage.

"For the most part, those protections are very strong for health insurance discrimination and for employment discrimination," she said. There are some exceptions for small businesses. Life and long term disability insurance can be impacted.

Dr. Robert Green of Brigham and Women's Hospital says a genetic test can provide helpful information for patients. A genetic test is normally a blood or saliva sample. After a genetic test, patients with a mutation in a gene turn to treatment options, which can range from vigilant monitoring to drastic measures like Jolie's.

"In some particular cases, you can find a high risk gene, you can address it beforehand even with this terribly drastic form of prophylaxis and lives can be saved," Dr. Green said.

Doctors say in many cases, specifically when there is a strong family history, insurance covers some of the cost of a genetic test. Without coverage a test such as Jolie's for a mutation on the BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes would cost between \$3,000 and \$4,000.

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