Attitudes and Psychological Impact of Genetic Testing, Genetic Counseling, and Breast Cancer Risk Assessment Among Women at Increased Risk

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In 2002, an estimated 203,500 new cases of breast cancer developed in the United States, taking the lives of 39,600 women (American Cancer Society, 2003). The disease’s etiology is multifactorial; genetics, environmental factors, and the use of hormones all participate in the ultimate expression of breast cancer. Although no measures can guarantee prevention of breast cancer, steps can be taken to promote early detection. Early detection saves lives, improves quality of life, and reduces healthcare costs.

The average American woman has a 1 in 8 chance of developing breast cancer in her lifetime. Several factors increase a woman’s chances of developing breast cancer, including age older than 40, a personal history of breast cancer or benign breast disease, a mother or sister who has had breast cancer, never giving birth or giving birth after age 30, a long menstrual history, environmental factors, and diet. The most significant risk factors for developing breast cancer are female gender and age older than 40 years.

In addition, having a first-degree relative with breast cancer places a woman at increased risk for developing the disease (Runowicz, Petrek, & Gansler, 1999). A first-degree relative is defined as a biologic parent, sibling, or child. If a woman has a first-degree relative with the disease, her risk increases threefold. This risk increases two to five times the usual risk if the first-degree relative dies of breast cancer at an age younger than 50 years (Runowicz et al.). Risk increases as the age at diagnosis of the first-degree relative decreases.

Key Points . . .

➤ Although knowing whether one is hereditarily predisposed to breast cancer may have benefits, the extent of individual benefit still is unclear. Although knowing mutation status may provide a sense of control in life plans, it may alternatively create high levels of anxiety.

➤ Women at increased risk for breast cancer need comprehensive information about the benefits and limitations of genetic testing, in addition to alternatives, to ensure that choices about genetic testing are informed decisions.

➤ To tailor care to women who have undergone genetic testing for hereditary breast cancer or those who plan to undergo testing, nurses should actively listen to patient concerns and ask questions that probe into their feelings and expectations.