

Genetic Counseling Services

What is Genetic Counseling?

Genetic counseling is the process of explaining medical information about an inherited disorder or birth defect to an individual or a family. These conditions are not rare problems; about one in 30 babies has a birth defect and one in 10 adults has a genetic condition.

Genetic counseling is provided by a genetic counselor and/or a medical geneticist. They discuss the condition and its management, how it is inherited, available testing, the risk to other family members, and the risk of having children with the disorder. They also explore the impact of the disorder on both affected and unaffected family members and aid in adjustment to the diagnosis.

The goal of genetic counseling is for families and individuals to understand the medical information, make appropriate decisions about their medical care, and to manage any associated problems in a way that is best for them. Ideally, these decisions will reflect their personal values and cultural beliefs. Genetic counselors offer support through this process.



Who Should Consider Genetic Counseling?

Anyone who has questions about birth defects or medical conditions in their family such as:

Pregnant women who

- Will be 35 years or older at delivery
- Get a positive Expanded AFP result
- Are concerned that their medical history or lifestyle may increase the risks to their pregnancy, including use of certain medications or street drugs, and conditions such as diabetes or epilepsy

Individuals who are affected with or

- Have a family history of Down syndrome or other chromosomal abnormality
- Have a family history of an inherited condition such as hemophilia or muscular dystrophy
- Are carriers of recessive disorders such as sickle cell anemia, cystic fibrosis, Tay-Sachs disease, and the thalassemias
- Have a child who is mentally retarded, developmentally delayed, and/or has physical birth defects
- Have a strong family history of adult onset disorders such as breast or colon cancer

Couples who

- are first cousins or closer blood relatives



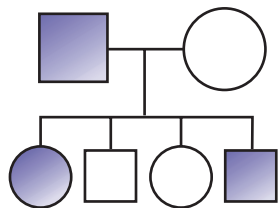
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What Happens in a Genetic Counseling Appointment?

Prior to the visit, the genetic counselor may ask about the health of family members and review medical records.

A typical appointment lasts one hour. A physical exam may be performed by a medical geneticist. Further tests or evaluations may be recommended to clarify a diagnosis. Other family members will occasionally need to be tested. The genetic implications as well as the management and treatment of the condition will be discussed. Referrals may be given for community support groups. A referral may be made to the psychologist. The psychologist provides psychotherapy for individuals and families adapting to change or experiencing emotional distress related to their genetic condition.

Tests are not available for all conditions. However, since the field of Genetics is rapidly advancing, it is important to periodically contact a Genetics department for updated information.



Who Are the Members of the Genetics Team?

The Genetics team is composed of medical geneticists, genetic counselors, and a psychologist.

Medical geneticists are physicians with training in the diagnosis and management of genetic diseases and birth defects.

Genetic counselors are masters level health care professionals trained in genetics and counseling.

The **psychologist** is a psychotherapist with experience in genetics.

Specialized genetics tests are performed in two laboratories:

The **cytogenetics laboratory** performs chromosome studies.

The **molecular genetics laboratory** studies DNA to diagnose specific genetic diseases.

Kaiser Permanente Genetic Counseling Services in Northern California

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