

How much does it cost?

“Appropriate testing for common BRCA mutations costs around R1 500 and is funded by medical aids and the public sector; more extensive testing for rare BRCA mutations can cost up to about R13 000, and is funded in the public sector, but not by all medical aids,” says Professor Apffelstaedt.

Changing your fate: Prevention Management

Despite the amazing inroads made in the treatment of cancer, and in this case, breast cancer, the simple thought of cancer still terrifies many. Regardless of whether or not it is a death sentence, most of us are acutely aware of the dreadful side-effects of chemo and/or radiation, and the extremely long road that awaits newly-diagnosed patients. Finding out that you have up to 90% chance of actually getting breast cancer, would, I imagine, be no less emotionally taxing than finding out that you actually have cancer. It comes as no surprise then that Professor Apffelstaedt says that testing for BRCA gene abnormalities is reserved for patients who have been properly counselled.

A positive test result will be an indication that you have inherited a known harmful mutation in BRCA1 or BRCA2 and, therefore, have an increased risk of developing breast and ovarian cancer. However, a positive test result can only provide information about a person's risk of developing cancer. It cannot tell whether an individual will actually develop cancer or when. It also can not tell whether or not you have passed the mutation onto one of your children.

Professor Apffelstaedt warns that because testing is not yet available for disease-causing mutations in genes other than BRCA, a negative BRCA test does not exclude the presence of another genetic cause for breast cancer.

Did you know? The BRCA1 and BRCA2 gene are most commonly found in the Jewish population.

For women being found to be carriers of a disease-causing BRCA mutation, Dr Nosworthy

GET REGULAR SCREENING

Screening increases your chance of breast cancer being picked up early enough to cure it.

thy says that one should discuss, in detail, your options with your breast cancer specialist. Professor Apffelstaedt says that like Jolie, one could consider a risk-reduction mastectomy as one of the management options. “A risk-reduction mastectomy with immediate reconstruction is funded with very few exceptions by the public system as well as by medical aids. We regard this as a wise employment of public as well as private funds, as the treatment of cancer is traumatic to patients, extremely costly and its prevention by comparison, far cheaper,” says the Breast Interest Group of Southern Africa.

Even if you choose not to have the test, but know you are predisposed to being high-risk due to your family history, experts suggest that you:

- ✓ Do monthly breast self-examinations.
- ✓ Have six-monthly clinical breast examinations.
- ✓ Have annual mammography, sonography or MRI from 40 years of age (or 5 years earlier than youngest age of diagnosis).

Deciding what to do with the knowledge that you are at high risk of breast cancer is a complex and emotionally draining process. Both our experts have advised that you work with a team of health professionals you trust in order to be given all the options available to you.

For more information on breast cancer, visit reputable sites like:

- <http://www.geneticcounselling.co.za>
- <http://www.mybreast.org.za/>
- <http://www.cansa.org.za/>

The Stages of cancer

According to Dr Nosworthy, breast cancer survival rates depend on the stage of the cancer when diagnosed as well as many other individual factors relating to each person's cancer. However the survival rates are very good provided treatment is initiated when the cancer is found.

Stage 0 cancer: Cancer detected at mammographic screening; no tumor palpable in the breast.

Stage 1 cancer: The cancer is extremely small with no evidence of spreading to the lymph nodes.

Stage 2 cancer: The tumour is extremely small but there is already spread of the cancer into the lymph nodes.

Stage 3 cancer: The tumour is large and/or there is more extensive spread into the lymph nodes but no evidence of further spread.

Stage 4 cancer: The cancer has spread further into the body such as the lungs, liver or bones. Stage 4 cancer is incurable.

Lifestyle factors that increase breast cancer risk:

- Overweight
- Smoking
- Hormone replacement therapy
- Family history
- No children
- Lack of physical activity
- High-fat diet