Arranging a test

Medicare requirements do not allow your GP to order BRCA gene testing. The test must be requested by a medical specialist such as a clinical geneticist or medical oncologist. This is because of the complexities involved in understanding and using the test results.

National genetic testing guidelines also require that you have genetic counselling and provide written consent before testing is performed.

Your blood sample can be collected at one of our many Sonic Healthcare collection centres across Australia. No special preparation or booking is necessary.

If you have further questions, we recommend that you discuss your personal situation with your doctor.
BRCA1 and BRCA2 are the genes best known as being associated with an inherited risk of developing breast and ovarian cancers. Medicare now offers rebates for BRCA gene testing.

How do BRCA gene mutations affect cancer risk?
An inherited error (or mutation) in any one of a number of genes can place a person at increased risk of cancer. Inherited mutations in the BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes are the most common cause of a familial tendency to develop breast or ovarian cancer.

Mutations in other genes such as STK11, PTEN, CDH1, PALB2 and TP53 can also cause familial breast cancer, but these occur much less commonly.

Will someone with a BRCA gene mutation always develop cancer?
No. The presence of a mutation in BRCA1 or BRCA2 increases the possibility of developing cancer, but some people with a mutation will never develop cancer. The specific risk of cancer will vary with your age, gender, the gene involved and the type of mutation.

Similarly, the lack of an identified BRCA gene mutation does not mean that a person will not develop cancer. The risk may be reduced, but cancer can still occur.

How are the BRCA genes tested?
DNA is extracted from a blood sample and analysed to check for a mutation in the BRCA1 and BRCA2 gene sequences. The test may also check for a mutation in other genes which can cause familial cancer.

Do many people with breast or ovarian cancer have a BRCA gene mutation?
Most people with breast or ovarian cancer do not have an inherited mutation in a cancer gene. Overall, approximately 5% of women with breast cancer, and 15% of those with ovarian cancer, have an inherited mutation in one of the BRCA genes. The chance of there being a mutation varies with age, type of breast or ovarian cancer, and family history.

Does Medicare cover the cost of BRCA gene testing for everyone?
No. Medicare only provides a rebate for breast cancer gene testing in certain circumstances.

› For an individual who has had breast or ovarian cancer, the requesting doctor must confirm that the chance of a BRCA gene mutation is at least 10% (there are tools and guidelines to help doctors make that assessment accurately).

› For an individual with relapsed ovarian cancer that initially responded to chemotherapy.

› For an individual who has not had breast or ovarian cancer, there must be a close family member with an identified mutation in BRCA1, BRCA2 or one of the other familial breast or ovarian cancer genes.

What happens if Medicare requirements for BRCA gene testing are not met?
If your circumstances do not meet Medicare requirements, you can pay for BRCA gene testing yourself. It is important to discuss this test with a medical specialist to ensure they are satisfied that testing is worthwhile. We require that the test is requested by a medical specialist and that you have pre-test genetic counselling.

Why do I need genetic counselling before the test?
Genetic testing is used to determine the underlying genetic cause of your condition. The outcome of a genetic test may have medical and psychological ramifications for both the person tested and for their relatives. It is important that these issues are discussed and considered before the test is undertaken.

Genetic counselling facilitates these discussions, giving you the opportunity to ask questions and to understand the implications of this test for you and your relatives.

It is accepted international practice that these issues be addressed with an experienced healthcare professional, such as a genetic counsellor, before testing is done.