



## Q+A WITH OVERLAKE'S GENETIC COUNSELOR

Genetic counselors help patients and their family members identify and manage inherited cancer risk. This information can help detect cancers early, guide treatment decisions

and even prevent cancer. *Healthy Outlook* spoke with Overlake's genetic counselor, Kathy Shih, MS, LGC to learn more.

### WHEN MIGHT SOMEONE GET A GENETIC TEST?

**Shih:** About 5-10% of cancers are related to a hereditary cancer syndrome. Generally, people are offered testing if they are diagnosed with cancer at a young age and/or have a significant family history of cancer. Some types of cancer, such as ovarian, warrant testing at any age of diagnosis even without a family history.

### HOW CAN GENETIC TESTING BE HELPFUL?

**Shih:** Genetic testing can be empowering and can save lives. For example, a patient with breast cancer may opt for a more conservative lumpectomy if they test negative for hereditary breast cancer syndromes. A patient who tests positive may consider a mastectomy because she is at an increased risk of developing a second breast cancer.

Identifying a mutation also allows testing for unaffected family members. For someone who doesn't have cancer but are identified to have a hereditary cancer syndrome, they can meet with our high-risk cancer team to talk about how to be proactive: what preventive measures can be taken,

*what are the screening options, and if surgical options that are available. Someone with hereditary colorectal cancer can reduce their risk with more frequent colonoscopies, removing polyps before they become cancerous. A woman with hereditary breast and ovarian cancer syndrome may consider surgery to significantly reduce the chance of developing ovarian cancer. She may consider high risk screening or medication to reduce her risk of breast cancer.*

### WHY DID YOU BECOME INTERESTED IN GENETIC COUNSELING?

**Shih:** After studying psychology at the University of Washington, I thought about becoming a nurse, social worker, therapist; but nothing struck me as being right for me. One day I was reading an article in *Marie Claire* about BRCA testing and genetic counselors. It's like a light bulb went off: 'This is exactly what I want to do.' It was pure luck I was reading that magazine at that particular time.

### WHAT IS THE BEST PART OF YOUR JOB?

**Shih:** I enjoy hearing about each patient's experience and their family history. I like presenting this complicated concept in a way that makes sense and allows patients to make informed decisions. I am also constantly learning. New conditions are discovered all the time and testing options are always evolving, so I have to keep track of the latest advances in genetic medicine. The nerdy side of me loves it.