



NEWS RELEASE



For Immediate Release

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(5/3/24) Southern 7 Health Department Expands Genetic Cancer Testing and Counseling Program State-Wide

Last Spring, Southern 7 Health Department (S7HD) received funding from the American Cancer Society to implement a pilot genetic testing and counseling (GTaC) program to help patients in Southern Illinois identify their risk for developing eight potential cancers. Since the start of the program, S7HD has continued to see an increase in test positivity rates and plans to use this program as a model to expand state-wide.

In January, The Hope Light Foundation received a \$50,000 grant from Aetna Better Health® of Illinois to expand the legacy Hope Light Cancer Corner project to a new level by employing a GTaC program to identify inherited cancers early and implement an aggressive ovarian cancer awareness (OCA) program that promotes early detection. Hope Light has since established a partnership with the Southern 7 Health Department to develop and implement a state-wide GTaC/OCA program in collaboration with Aetna, the Illinois Ovarian Cancer Partnership, and the University of Chicago.

Genetic Cancer Testing looks for genetic cancer mutations in a person's DNA, which could result in earlier detection and prevention of cancer. Within its first year of testing, S7HD reports test positivity rates at approximately 17%, which is much higher than the national average of 10%. This is significant as the region's cancer cases and death rates also trend higher than national average.

After reviewing similar cancer trends in other parts of Illinois, S7HD officials concluded it vital to expand the program to other parts of the state. Through additional funding, six health departments have been selected to participate in the program. Expansion of the program will begin over the next few months.

The focus of the expansion will involve a two-fold program that includes the GTaC program and an aggressive OCA program to communicate ovarian cancer signs and symptoms to women and their providers to promote early detection and treatment. The goal is to develop and deploy processes, systems and interventions that will enable early cancer detection, reduce cancer risks and increase survivability of a cancer that has no screening and often goes undetected until it reaches late stages.

"As our country moves toward personalized health, everyone should be aware of their DNA status," said Rhonda Andrews-Ray, S7HD Executive Director/Public Health Administrator. "Genetic cancer testing and counseling is the ultimate crystal ball in cancer prevention and treatment."

According to the National Cancer Institute, about 13% of all cancers may be due to inherited genetic changes. Genetic testing is extremely important for those with a risk for cancer that does not have a screening test, such as ovarian cancer, which can detect the cancer in early stages.

Genetic cancer testing through Southern 7 Health Department is available by appointment only, and involves a simple blood draw or saliva sample to determine your risk of developing breast, colorectal, ovarian, prostate, gastric, melanoma, pancreatic, and uterine cancer. A positive test can pinpoint your risk of developing cancer, helping you to make informed medical decisions to reduce that risk. It can also provide an explanation to your doctor of your personal or family history of cancer and help to identify other at-risk relatives for whom genetic testing is recommended.

For more information about the GTaC and OCA programs available through Southern 7 Health Department, call 618-634-2297, visit southern7.org, or download the Southern 7 app.

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