Breast cancer remains a leading health concern for women. Genetic medical research is beginning to alter breast cancer screening recommendations and breast cancer treatment. This article discusses the use of the Family Systems Genetic Illness (FSGI) Model to provide greater understanding of some of the more common personal and family issues related to breast cancer. After a brief presentation of a case study of a woman who chose to undergo bilateral mastectomy to avoid breast cancer and a critique of the FSGI Model, application of the FSGI Model to breast cancer will be considered. The FSGI Model categorizes genetic illness according to the degree of the genetic risk the illness has, potential severity, age of clinical onset, and whether treatment can alter the onset or course. The article seeks to help nurses assist women in balancing their personal and family responsibilities and choices in light of new knowledge and medical care of breast cancer today.

Mrs. R, an employed 54-year-old Italian American woman, was seen by a homecare nurse the day after her discharge from the hospital, where she had bilateral mastectomy for the prevention of breast cancer. Her husband was home but did not participate in the home visit. About six weeks before the surgery, she had learned that she had a benign breast mass, but she opted for prophylactic bilateral mastectomies because of a strong family history of breast cancer. Five days after surgery, she had returned home, the surgical sites were healing well, and she had a date for reconstructive surgery.

Mrs. R also believed that where she lived, Long Island, NY, was associated with a much higher rate of breast cancer than other geographical areas, something she had read about regularly in the local press. She said she had not understood the implications of emerging information about the genetics of breast cancer. The FSGI Model provides a framework to better understand the genetic risk an illness has, its potential severity, the age of clinical onset, and whether treatment can alter the onset or course. The model can help nurses assist their patients in making important decisions regarding breast cancer screening, prevention, and management.

At a Glance
- Genetic medical research is increasingly altering healthcare decisions in cancer care.
- The Family Systems Genetic Illness Model provides a useful tool for nurses working with women at high risk for breast cancer and their families.
- All women with a family history of breast cancer should see a genetics counselor.

Decisions about screening and breast cancer management now are guided not only by family and personal history and clinical status but also by genetic testing information. Genetic testing promises to provide more accurate and personalized risk assessment. It may help to reduce the need for biopsies and cascade genetic testing. It also may help to reduce the need for chemotherapy and radiation therapy for women who are found to be at low risk for breast cancer.

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