Pros & Cons of Workers Getting Gene Tests

By Ruth Kava — December 16, 2015

Would you like to know if you carry a gene (or genes) that increase your risk of some disease or condition, for example obesity, or some form of cancer? Well, that knowledge might be coming soon to a workplace near you.

According to a recent report in the Wall Street Journal, some firms are making it possible for employees to get tested for genetic markers linked to risks of altered metabolism, obesity, and variations in eating behavior. This is a good thing, right? Well, yes and no.

The upside, of course, is that if you know you have an increased risk of obesity, for example, then that knowledge might motivate you to work a little harder to improve your exercise and eating habits.

One woman who participated in a pilot program of such testing learned that she carried two markers that made her more prone to obesity, as well as one that affected her appetite. She then started running regularly and reduced her consumption of sugary foods. The upshot was a weight loss of over 40 pounds, which presumably would also reduce her risk of metabolic syndrome (a condition in which the body is resistant to insulin, leading to other abnormalities).

And of course, learning that you have a gene or genes that make you more prone to some type of cancer could lead to more screening and earlier detection and perhaps more effective treatment.

Another benefit for employers is saving money on employees’ health care. According to a study from Duke University, obesity alone costs American companies over $73 billion per year. And it’s easy to see why, since obesity can lead to chronic ills such as Type-2 diabetes and high blood pressure, which require lifelong monitoring and attention from health care providers to say nothing of the costs of prescriptions to deal with the sequelae of these conditions. So if employees can be motivated by learning their personal risk factors, it would be a win-win for all concerned.

But is there a downside to this sort of testing? Well, there might be depending on how the information is handled. Does the employer have access to the employees’ information? Could there be discrimination based on a person's propensity for obesity, for example? And would the employee have access to assistance in dealing with his or her information? For example, a person who is told that he or she has markers making them more prone to obesity, might become
depressed at the knowledge and do little to affect their risk.

Thus some caveats must be taken into account. These tests can be beneficial to both companies and their employees, but the information should remain confidential and the employer should not have access to it. Further, employees should have access to effective support programs so that they can deal with the results of the tests in a manner that benefits their health.

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