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Breast cancer runs in her family, but Jennifer Duch beat the disease. Meet her on page 14.

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New test, new hope

Blood tests monitor the progress of treatment and spread of disease

By William Wilburn

RECURRENCE OF CANCER can be caught earlier, thanks to a new blood test now available at Cancer Treatment Centers of America® (CTCA) at Midwestern Regional Medical Center in Zion, Ill. Called the CellSearch™ circulating tumor cell test, it is the first to quickly and automatically capture, identify and count the cells that detach from a tumor and circulate in the bloodstream.

In the past, oncologists often had to wait several months before they could determine whether a specific treatment was beneficial to the patient. Approved by the Food and Drug Administration, the test is a tool for detecting the spreading, or metastasis, of breast, colorectal and prostate cancer, and helps oncologists make more informed decisions about patient care sooner than with other methods.

“All you need is to have 7.5 milliliters of blood drawn, just like regular blood work,” said Bradford Tan, MD, medical director of laboratory at CTCA at Midwestern. “This is one of the most easily performed tests available.”

Measuring the number of circulating tumor cells in a patient’s blood before treatment to establish a baseline — and at regular intervals, thereafter — can help doctors monitor the patient’s progress and tailor treatments.

“You cannot assess the patient’s condition based on one test result,” Dr. Tan said. “A series of tests has to be given in order to give us a better idea of how the patient is

doing. It’s a good predictor of the patient’s overall survival.

“This is an important tool for us in deciding which way to go,” he continued. “If you have a patient who has an elevated circulating tumor cell count, by having a series of tests, you are seeing the trend. That may help in determining whether to switch to a different chemo or some other change in the treatment regimen.”

A test showing fewer than five circulating tumor cells in patients with metastatic breast cancer indicates a good prognosis and is predictive of a better overall survival rate. Five or more circulating tumor cells in a blood sample, however, indicate the disease is progressing and,

as a result, the doctor may choose to adjust the treatment series.

“Obviously, this has to be discussed with the oncologist and the patient sitting together,” Dr. Tan said. “It has implications for both the oncologist and the patient because with these tests, they can now predict or at least decide this particular chemo may not be as effective as one would think. So you are trying to tailor or adjust your chemo for better results.”

Dr. Tan also said that, just like any other test in the laboratory, results of the CellSearch circulating tumor cell test have to be considered in the context of the patient’s condition and considered along with other clinical information. **CFThrive**

How does the CellSearch circulating tumor cell test work?

Metastatic breast cancer occurs when cancer spreads from its primary site in the breast to other places in the body through the circulatory or lymphatic system. Metastasis may begin via circulating tumor cells — cancer cells that spread through the blood or lymphatics after detaching from a solid tumor.

Clinical studies have shown the number of circulating tumor cells in the blood sample can help doctors predict progression-free survival — the length of time during and after medication or treatment during which the disease being treated does not get worse — and overall survival earlier than the current

standard of care with similar precision.

Currently, doctors use lab tests, physical exams and radiographic imaging studies to determine progression of the disease. Circulating tumor cell measurement is performed at the start of a new chemotherapy (baseline) and at different intervals of follow up, typically every three to four weeks, depending on the type of chemotherapy the patient is receiving.

Oncologists often have to wait several months before they can determine if a specific treatment is beneficial. The CellSearch™ circulating tumor cell test can assist oncologists in making more informed decisions about patient care sooner.