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Somatic mosaicism



This communication aid has been produced for clinicians to help support and guide conversations about somatic mosaicism with their patients.

Our bodies are made of trillions of cells, each with a specific role. Most cells contain a nucleus that holds our genetic information – including our genes, which are the instructions for how our body works.

When a sperm fertilises an egg, the fertilised egg divides into more cells repeatedly, eventually forming an embryo that develops into a baby, and later, an adult. Each of these cells carry a copy of the same genetic information.

Sometimes when cells divide, small errors can occur when copying this genetic information, like a spelling mistake. This is called a 'variant' or '**change**'. These changes are usually repaired by the body, but sometimes cells with a change continue to grow and divide. This can result in some cells having different genetic instructions than others, known as somatic mosaicism.

The number and location of cells with the change depends on when and where the error happened during development.

Key terms

Gene change: Changes in a gene or chromosome used to be referred to as 'mutations.' Now, they are more commonly called changes, alterations or variants.

In many cases, genetic changes do not cause any problems. If the change affects how the cell works, this can cause health problems.

Whether a mosaic genetic change can be passed on to children depends on whether a person's sperm or eggs carry the change. See our communication aid on gonadal (germline) mosaicism for more information.

Want to learn more?

Scan to read or download a guide from Unique on mosaicism









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