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Colon cancer researchers find vital clue

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A team of Cleveland-based researchers has zoomed in on a specific part of a chromosome that can be linked to cases of familial colon cancer.

The next step is to determine which one of about 200 genes on that particular section of "chromosome 9" is responsible for the disease.

The discovery is "very, very significant," said Ralf Krahe, associate professor of cancer genetics at the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center.

"It certainly will set the stage for the subsequent identification of the disease-causing gene," he said.

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More than a dozen researchers affiliated with University Hospitals of Cleveland and Case Western Reserve University analyzed blood samples from about 230 people. The participants represented 53 families in which two siblings had been diagnosed with colorectal cancer or large, precancerous polyps before age 65.

Dr. Sanford Markowitz, the study's principal investigator, said the team took that approach because one in five people with colon cancer has an immediate relative who has had the disease.

"There is a clear tendency of colon cancer to run in some families," he said.

Markowitz said 40 percent of the families involved in the study came from the Cleveland area. The remainder signed up after Katie Couric, co-founder of the National Colorectal Cancer Research Alliance, made an appeal on the "Today" show. Her hus-

band died of the disease.

Couric's group contributed \$800,000 to the study, Markowitz said. In addition, the researchers have received \$4.5 million from the National Institutes of Health over the last four years, as well as other money from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, for which Markowitz is an investigator.

Markowitz equated the study's findings to making a down payment on a house. "We're excited, but now we have to go and buy the rest of the house," he said. "We still have to move in."

He and Dr. Georgia Wiesner, lead author of the study — which is to be published electronically this week in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences — said their team already is focused on finding the disease-causing gene. Their starting point lies with three genes that are known to play a role in some cancers.

After the researchers identify the gene and verify their work, their long-term goal is to be able to tell someone whether he or she is carrying the gene and which family members should be checked.

"If we can identify people at high risk and get them screened, we can save lives," Markowitz said.

Colorectal cancer is the second leading cause of cancer deaths among adult Americans. More than 129,000 new cases of colon cancer will be diagnosed this year, according to the National Foundation for Cancer Research. About 56,600 will die from the disease.

But if it's caught early, it's curable, said Wiesner, director of the Center for Human Genetics at UH and Case.

"Screening works," she said, noting the problem is that some people won't get screened because they are squeamish. "It really shouldn't be something people avoid, but they do."

Researchers need 100 more families to participate in the next phase of their study. Siblings who have had colon cancer or polyps before turning 65 are eligible. Call the Ireland Cancer Center Information Service at University Hospitals at 1-800-641-2422.

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