Tests may offer clues to cancer recurrence

NEW ORLEANS (AP) - Genetic tests on women with breast cancer could determine the risk of recurrence for some patients, improving the chance of treating women generally thought to be safe, a researcher said Friday.

Cancerspecialistsalsoreport that the use of lumpectomy and radiation therapy appear to be promising alternatives to breast removal for a common form of early breast cancer. The scientists' findings are being presented this week at the American College of Radiology's 24th annual National Conference on Breast Cancer in New Orleans.

Genetic, or DNA, tests are run on some women, usually those with large tumors, to reveal whether cells are dividing rapidly and the cancer is expected to spread, said Dr. Eva Rubin, chief of the mammography section at the University of Alabama in Birmingham.

But a new study indicates that similar genetic irregularities indicating aggressive cancer show up in both large and small tumors, a finding that could cue doctors to begin additional treatment to fight recurrence, Rubin said.

Currently, women with small cancerous breast tumors that have not spread to the lymph nodes have surgery or a lumpectomy with radiation therapy, Rubin said. Most do not receive follow-up chemotherapy or hormonal therapy, she said.

But 30 percent of those patients later die from recurring cancer, she said.

The Birmingham test was designed to determine if DNA test results were different for palpable, larger tumors that can be felt, and non-palpable carcinous tumors, she said.

"Of the 21 palpable and 24 non-palpable cancers we reviewed, we found that DNA characteristics of small tumors are the same as larger tumors," Rubin said.

A DNA test on tissue taken in a biopsy can show if the cells are rapidly dividing and if the DNA has more or fewer chromosomes than the normal 46. If the tumor is growing and the DNA test is abnormal, it is likely the patient's cancer is aggressive, Rubin said.

The study does not mean that all patients with breast cancer should have the DNA test to find out whether the tumor is aggressive, she said. More research and tests are needed before recommendations are made, Rubin said.

But a study of 88 patients at New Haven Hospital shows a very high success rate using the more conservative approach, he said. Haffty said that only three of the patients had recurring cancer.

The median time since treatment is four years with some patients followed for two and others up to 10 years. "Though we feel it is highly unlikely, if there is a chance the cancer could come back, the breast should be removed. The New Haven study so far does not bear out this concern," Haffty said.

"A main message here is that it's important for women to be screened by mammography so these tumors can be picked up earlier, treated more conservatively and this will give the patient a much better prognosis," he said.