Genetic Testing—Key Concepts

• Some genetic tests are completely predictive—a positive result means you have or will definitely get the medical condition.

• Other genetic tests—such as the APOE test for Alzheimer’s disease—can only tell you if you are at a greater-than-average risk for developing a condition; the tests can’t predict with certainty that you will get it.

• Sometimes the disease develops at a very young age, other times it occurs in midlife, and yet other times it occurs late in life.

• Sometimes responses such as surgeries or medications exist to prevent the condition. In such cases, knowing about the condition (or the risk factor) can help you reduce the bad consequences of the condition or can reduce or completely eliminate the risk. Other times, there is no response that will definitely lower your risk of the condition.

• Often, test results have implications not only for the person being tested, but also for genetically related family members such as siblings. This possibility raises many questions about what information the person being tested should share with family members.

• Many people have expressed concern about how best to ensure that results of a genetic test remain confidential and how to avoid discrimination based on genetic information. For example, some people are concerned that insurers and employers could find ways to use this information to deny health coverage or work opportunities to people with certain genetic predispositions.