Spinal and bulbar muscular atrophy (SBMA or Kennedy disease) is a motor neuron disease characterized by slowly progressive muscle weakness associated with mild insensitivity to the hormone androgen. Symptoms typically begin between the ages of 20 and 50 years, with difficulty walking and a tendency to fall. Patients often show breast development, testicular atrophy and reduced fertility due to androgen insensitivity. The vast majority of patients with SBMA have a normal life expectancy and do not die from direct complications of their disease.

**GENETICS**

The principal mutation causing SBMA is an increase in the number of CAG repeats within the androgen receptor (AR) gene located on the X chromosome (Xq11-q12). The normal gene contains a three base pair sequence (CAG) that is repeated on each X chromosome.

SBMA is an X-linked recessive disease occurring once in every 50,000 males. Males normally have one X chromosome in each cell. If that X chromosome carries the expansion mutation in the AR gene, the boy will have SBMA. Affected males who are fertile will pass the expanded gene to each daughter who will become a carrier, but not to their sons.

Females normally have two X chromosomes in each cell. If one X chromosome carries the mutation in the AR gene and the other one does not, the girl will be a carrier of SBMA. Carriers do not have and will not develop SBMA. Carrier females may, however, transmit the repeat expansion in the AR gene to their children. Each son of a carrier mother has a 50% chance of being affected. Each daughter of a carrier mother has a 50% chance of being a carrier.

**WHO SHOULD BE TESTED?**

- Individuals clinically suspected of being affected with SBMA
- Individuals with a family history of SBMA, to determine carrier status of unaffected individuals

**TEST METHODS**

- PCR analysis across the CAG repeat to measure the number of repeats in the androgen receptor (AR) gene.

**TEST SENSITIVITY**

Expansion of the AR repeat occurs in 99% of individuals affected with SBMA. Approximately 1% of SBMA cases are caused by other types of mutation in the AR gene that will not be detected by this test.

**POTENTIAL OUTCOMES & INTERPRETATION OF TEST RESULTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex of Patient</th>
<th>AR (CAG) Repeats</th>
<th>Expansion Range</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>9 - 34</td>
<td>Normal</td>
<td>This result does not support a diagnosis of SBMA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>36 - 66</td>
<td>Affected</td>
<td>This result confirms a diagnosis of SBMA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9 - 34</td>
<td>Normal</td>
<td>This individual is unlikely to be affected with, or a carrier of, SBMA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>36 - 66</td>
<td>Carrier</td>
<td>This individual is a carrier of SBMA and may transmit a mutation to offspring</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For More Information


To locate a genetics center near you, please visit the Canadian Association of Genetic Counsellors website at [www.cagc-acgc.ca](http://www.cagc-acgc.ca) or the National Society of Genetic Counsellors website at [www.nsgc.org](http://www.nsgc.org)