

## Regular screening can save lives – doctor



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**Dubai:** A new line of genetic testing is now open for UAE residents and laboratory technicians can specifically test for gene mutations which are specific to the local population, a senior doctor of a laboratory network said.

The network has partnered with King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Centre in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and will offer tests for 14 common genetic disorders ranging from sickle cell disease to cystic fibrosis. "Regular screening really can save lives," said Dr Sunil Tadepalli, vice-president, laboratory operations of Medsol.

Sickle cell disease is an inherited blood disorder and turns red blood cells into sickle or crescent-shaped. These get blocked in small blood vessels. Cystic fibrosis turns the mucus thick and sticky and blocks airways.

He said when tests were earlier sent to laboratories in Europe and the US, the technicians there would look for gene mutations which are specific to that population. "Genetic mutations which are indicative of certain disease traits that are common in the West can be different in Arab populations," he said.

The test results will be sent back from Riyadh within three weeks. Another expert said the cost of the test is minimal as compared to the value genetic tests offer.

"It allows you to change your lifestyle and plan your future roadmap," said Junaid Faruq, marketing director of Eastern Biotech and Life Sciences, which offers DNA paternity testing.

According to Dr Tadepalli, nearly 7,000 genetic conditions have been identified, but that some of them are extremely rare. He said population screening would be a long, drawn out process and not cost effective. "When we find a case, we can check whether the siblings, parents or the immediate family is carrying the defective gene," said the doctor.

According to an international study, birth defects in the UAE are 76 per 1,000 births, one of the highest in the region, behind Saudi Arabia.

### Five common serious birth defects

- Congenital heart defects
- Neural tube defects
- Haemoglobin disorders (thalassaemia and sickle cell disease)
- Down's Syndrome
- Glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase (G6PD), the lack of this enzyme causes severe anaemia in the genes

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By Mahmood Saberi, Senior Reporter / Photo by Francois Nel

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