

BREAST CANCER: A Family Affair

Meet three women who changed their lives as a result of their mothers' breast cancer diagnoses—and find out how their experiences can help you protect your health. by BETHANY KANDEL

While breast cancer can strike young women—one in 227 thirtysomethings will develop it—there's no denying the risk increases substantially as you get older. But that doesn't mean you should ignore the threat in the meantime, especially if you have a family history of the disease. "All young women need to protect their breasts, and if a blood relative on either side of your family has had cancer, you need to be extra vigilant," says Marisa Weiss, M.D., a Philadelphia oncologist, breast cancer survivor, and founder of Breastcancer.org.

Figuring out what form, exactly, that vigilance should take can be particularly difficult for those who've watched their mothers battle the illness. Do you make over your lifestyle, start mammograms early, or even submit to prophylactic surgery? These are complex issues, as the following readers can attest. All of them had the misfortune of seeing their mothers cope with breast cancer—but, rather than being paralyzed by fear, they used the experience as a catalyst to attempt to lower their risk. Read their inspiring stories and learn how to safeguard your own health too.



“I got mad and took action.”

—Yael Cohen (left), 26,
with mother Diane Cohen, 53,
four-year survivor

When Yael Cohen's mother, Diane, was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2009, lots of well-wishers encouraged them to stay positive and believe that "everything happens for a reason." But the idea that cancer could have any upside never entered their minds.

"It was a difficult and confusing period," says Yael, who was 22 and working in finance at the time. "All I wanted to say was 'f*** cancer,'" she recalls. So she took those very words and had them printed on a t-shirt. When she handed it to her mom upon her return home from having her mastectomy, Yael wasn't sure how Diane would react. But she loved it and immediately put it on.

"I didn't think I would ever feel, say, or wear the words 'f*** cancer,'" says Diane. "But it was exactly how I felt at the time. I was angry, sad, and exhausted. I wanted people to read the shirt and know what I was going through." Though

BEN BAKER: HAIR: DAMIAN MONZILLO/BA-REPS; MAKEUP: YUKA SUZUKI/YUKAMAKEUPARTIST.COM

she was thrilled by her mom's response to the gift, Yael was surprised when Diane insisted on wearing it on a walk around the neighborhood. Turns out, "Mom couldn't go a block without people stopping to hug and high-five her."

Soon after, Yael created the FCancer Facebook group and posted a picture of the tee. Within a week, about 1,000 people asked where they could buy one. "I initially figured I'd sell the shirts and donate the proceeds to charity, but I couldn't find one that resonated with me," she says. Whereas most breast cancer groups focus on research, Yael—whose mom was diagnosed with stage I cancer

after a routine mammogram—was passionate about getting young people to spread the message about finding cancer in its earliest, most curable stages. She also realized she was in a unique position to enlighten her peers.

A few months later, FCancer (letsfcancer.com) was born. The nonprofit is dedicated to educating Generation Y about prevention and early detection, and it encourages them to share this info with friends and relatives. Of course, most of this is done with plenty of sass. For example, the group compares having "the cancer talk" with your parents to the awkward "sex talk" they once

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had with you. (The goal is to get them to dish on any family history of cancer, adopt healthy habits, and have regular screenings.) To spread the word, FCancer relies heavily on social media: It has more than 77,000 "likes" on Facebook and nearly 32,000 Twitter followers.

Since founding FCancer, Yael has made some changes in her personal life as well. After experimenting with a variety of diets purported to reduce cancer risk—from vegan to Paleo—she finally

settled on what she calls a "balanced" plan. "I eat clean, whole, unprocessed foods the majority of the time," says Yael, who also group cycles and hikes at least four times a week to keep the disease at bay.

Yael knows nothing she does can guarantee a cancer-free future—or that her mom's cancer won't come back—but she's confident her efforts are worth it. "At the very least, I'll be prepared," she says. "And I'll always have the perfect shirt to wear."

"I had a prophylactic mastectomy."

—SARA DALY ROTER (left), 35, with mother BARBARA NEWMAN, 65, 10-year survivor

Six years ago, 29-year-old Sara Daly Roter was in the hospital having a double mastectomy and reconstruction, the same procedures her mother had undergone four years earlier after being diagnosed with breast cancer. But, because she was perfectly healthy, Sara's situation was charged with an extra layer of emotion. Like her mom, she carried the BRCA1 gene mutation; if she didn't act, her risk of the disease would be up to 85 percent higher than average.

"I always thought I'd eventually get breast cancer, because that's just what happens in my family," says Sara, whose grandmothers are both breast cancer survivors. It wasn't until after her mother was diagnosed and Sara tested positive for the BRCA1 mutation that the threat fully clicked. Yet she mostly pushed the info aside.

"I was young and single—I had recently started dating the guy I'd eventually marry—so I hoped getting annual mammograms was enough," says Sara, a design director for an accessories company.

Two years later and shortly after tying the knot, Sara consulted an oncologist, who urged further action. "She said I could do mammograms and ultrasounds every three months, or I could have a prophylactic double mastectomy," says Sara. It wasn't an easy decision, but surgery seemed better than worrying about what the next test might turn up—or miss. Having the

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support of her husband and mother made Sara more confident of her choice.

Doubts set in, though, shortly before she was scheduled to have surgery. But just as Sara was wondering if the procedure was “too radical,” she came across the website for Bright Pink, a national organization that provides support for high-risk women. She ended up spending hours on the phone with founder Lindsay Avner, who had a risk-reducing double mastectomy of her own at age 23. “Lindsay told me about everything from coping with the pain to the importance of bringing button-down shirts to the hospital,” says Sara.

Today, Sara has two daughters, ages 2 and 3, and is a Bright Pink ambassador who helped start the group’s New York City chapter. Along with everyday concerns about her children’s safety, Sara worries if they too could be BRCA1 positive. Barbara, meanwhile, hopes science will advance enough so that if her granddaughters one day discover they carry the mutation, they will have less extreme options to consider. “Whatever happens,” says Barbara, “the girls will have two strong women—Mom and Grandma—to help guide them.”



“My scare was a wake-up call.”

—SHAYNA WALKER (right), 28, with mother DESIRÉE WALKER, 51, four-year survivor

At 22 years old, Shayna Walker found herself sitting in the doctor’s waiting room after a routine physical, trying to compose herself before driving home. She was understandably upset because she had just learned there was a suspicious mass in her right breast. Shayna immediately phoned her mother, Desirée, a breast cancer survivor. “I worried that I would need surgery and treatment just like my mom, but she calmed me right down,” says Shayna. “She kept saying, ‘It could be nothing; let’s learn more before we get overly anxious.’”

Within two weeks Shayna had a biopsy—and was greatly relieved when the test came back negative. But, even though Shayna got the all clear, she realized it was time to get proactive about staying healthy—something her mom wishes she had done at Shayna’s age.

“When I was first diagnosed, I was clueless,” says Desirée, who found out she had breast cancer at 38 and again at 47. “Even though my paternal grandmother had had it, I didn’t know that family history on your father’s side mattered.” (It does.)

She also had no idea that African-American women are 40 percent more likely than white women to die from breast cancer, in part because they don’t receive treatment as promptly. Now in remission, Desirée is intent on sharing what she’s learned: She facilitates a Share Self-Help for Women with Breast or Ovarian Cancer support group for people of African-American and Caribbean heritage. And, of course, she’s been discussing the topic with her daughter all along.

Obviously Shayna, a talent scout for a media services

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RESOURCES

Young women facing hereditary breast or ovarian cancer will find help at:

Bright Pink
(brightpink.org)

Facing Our Risk of Cancer
(facingourrisk.org)

Young Survival Coalition
(youngsurvival.org)

Breast Cancer Special

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agency, had seen the disease up close and personal. She had helped her mother through a mastectomy and chemotherapy, accompanying Desirée on doctor's visits and making late-night runs for Korean fried chicken—the only thing that tasted good to her mom after chemo. But, she admits, she didn't take her personal risk seriously until after her own biopsy.

"Even with my mother's history, I never dwelled on the possibility of getting cancer, but my experience was a wake-up call," says Shayna, who now does monthly breast self-exams and urges friends and relatives to do the same, even though some experts no longer recommend them. "It's better to catch a problem early, before it spreads and becomes harder to treat," says Shayna.

Later this year, Shayna will have another mammogram and an ultrasound

or MRI, which will determine how often she needs to get screened going forward. "I know it sounds crazy, but I'm excited because it makes me feel like I'm doing something to protect myself," she says.

While Shayna has long supported various charities focused on breast cancer research—she's raised more than \$15,000 over the past nine years—the task has felt extra personal ever since she had her own scare. This month, for the second time, she'll join her mom for the Avon Walk for Breast Cancer. They'll each collect a minimum of \$1,800 in donations and spend two days following the 39-mile course that traverses New York City. "It's a celebration of my mom's journey and my health," says Shayna. "And it's a chance to bond with each other and all the other mothers and daughters who are in this together."

What All Young Women Need to Know

If none of your relatives had breast cancer, you're safe—right? If only! According to the American Cancer Society, a mere 5 to 10 percent of women who develop the disease have a family history of it. That's why it's so important for everyone to take charge of their health, and the earlier you start, the better, says Marisa Weiss, M.D., of Breastcancer.org. Her suggestions:

MOVE IT AND LOSE IT

Exercise at least three to four hours a week—five to seven is even better—and shed any excess pounds. "Being overweight increases your risk because fat cells make estrogen and other hormones, which can trigger the growth of breast cancer cells," says Weiss. New research shows that aerobic activity is also beneficial because it may help lower estrogen in the bloodstream.

DITCH THE CIGS

You're not only harming your lungs. There's growing evidence that long-term smoking increases the risk of breast cancer, particularly

among women who start puffing early.

PUT DOWN THE WINEGLASS

Alcohol might be heart-healthy, but research shows that the risk of breast cancer increases by about 7 percent for each drink consumed per day. Weiss suggests limiting your intake to three drinks or fewer per week (up to five is okay on occasion).

LOAD UP ON D

"The association between low levels of vitamin D and a higher breast cancer risk needs further study, but it may play an important role in maintaining normal breast cell growth," says

Weiss. Some experts suggest supplementing with 800 to 2,000 IUs per day, but check with your doctor to find out what's advisable for you.

CHOOSE ORGANIC DAIRY PRODUCTS

Farmers often give cows growth hormones to ramp up their milk production. These can show up in milk, cheese, yogurt, and other dairy products and, when ingested, can stimulate breast cells and cause them to replicate abnormally. You can avoid this problem by going organic, or stick with lowfat or fat-free dairy (hormones tend to stay in the fat of the milk).

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