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NEWS & INSIGHT



Laura and Helen Pattrin experienced the difficulty of deciding whether to have a mastectomy. *Photograph by KELLY COLEMAN*

LAURA'S SCARE | Two women struggle with breast cancer

AS A HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT, Laura Pattrin, 31, watched helplessly as her mom fought breast cancer.

Laura began getting mammograms 13 years earlier than most women. "I would rather be proactive than wait too long for something terrible to happen," she says.

When her first mammogram showed an abnormality, she had a biopsy. "I could only think about my own kids," she says. "I sat down and cried uncontrollably."

A woman's risk of breast cancer nearly doubles if she has a mother, sister or daughter diagnosed with the disease. About 15 percent of women who get it have a family history of breast cancer.

Earlier this year, Helen Pattrin, Laura's mother, decided to have genetic testing done for the BRCA gene, an indicator of high risk for breast cancer that could yield disastrous results for her daughter.

Before the results came in, Laura was prepared to have a preventative mastectomy. This was recently popularized by Angelina Jolie's decision in May to have the procedure after discovering that she had inherited the BRCA 1 gene from her mother, who died of breast cancer.

"If it came back positive, I was going to do it," she says firmly, echoing Jolie's sentiment. "I have to be healthy for my kids."

Laura stood by as Helen was diagnosed with invasive lobular carcinoma in 1999, a type of cancer that her annual mammograms couldn't detect. In December 1998, Helen noticed a ridge of hard tissue in her right breast. She had her first mastectomy Feb. 10, 1999.

Helen remembers looking like she had radio antenna sticking out of her breast as they marked her cancer by dye injection for surgery. "All of the sudden, it really hit me what was happening," Helen says.

"I remember when they were doing all the marking to determine where to put the needle thinking, 'Oh, I'm going to faint.'"

During the surgery, Helen's right breast was removed. Laura was scared for both her mom and herself. "It hit home after the first surgery," Laura says. "I stayed overnight at the hospital. I became physically ill seeing how much pain she was in."

It was unbelievable to Laura that her mother was sick; she was supposed to be fine. "I was angry," Laura says. "I didn't want to be home. I didn't want to be around a lot." She remembers how difficult it was to not have a mother around the way many of her friends did.

She watched as her mother's range of abilities lessened because the lymph nodes from her right arm were also removed during the surgery.

In October 1999, Helen had her second mastectomy. Laura watched her mother struggling with the numbness that now engulfs both breasts.

"It was hard, too, at the time, because my daughter was only 15," Helen says. "And I felt so sorry because all the attention was on me."

The tests showed that Helen was not a carrier of the BRCA gene and indicated that her daughter doesn't have a high risk of getting the same type of breast cancer.

Although she had a natural reaction for a high school girl dealing with life-changing circumstances, Laura still feels guilty for her behavior during her mother's battle. Now she says her mother is her best friend.

Fast forward to adulthood. A terrified Laura awaits the results of her biopsy; she knows the repercussions of the answer.

The biopsy results showed nothing out of the ordinary.

✦ MEGAN LEWIS