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Sue Ann Says: New Study Says Breast & Ovary Removal May Save Lives

Several years ago our friend Meg Goss tested negative for the BRCA 2 gene mutation, an abnormality known to greatly increase the risk of developing breast and ovarian cancer. A woman with a BRCA mutation is five times more likely to develop breast cancer, and ten to thirty times more likely to develop ovarian cancer than women who don't have a mutation.

And while this was great news, especially for her own daughter, her physicians, including her surgeon, radiologists and oncologist, thought it reasonable to have preemptive surgery to remove both of her breasts.

You see, Meg's mother, who was diagnosed with breast cancer at age 43, did test positive for the BRCA2 mutation as did several close relatives. Her maternal grandmother and four maternal aunts all died from cancer before testing was available. And, despite Meg's negative test result for BRCA2, she developed severe fibrocystic breast disease which resulted in multiple bilateral breast biopsies over the years.

After years of worrying about *when*, not *if*, she would get breast cancer, Meg decided to have both of her breasts removed. And the decision probably lengthened her life. The biopsy performed on her right breast after the mastectomy showed ductile carcinoma in situ, the most common form of non-invasive breast cancer.

New study shows pre-emptive ovary, breast removal lowers cancer risk

Meg's doctors were confident in recommending prophylactic surgery to reduce her risk of cancer. They knew that women who have inherited either of the two BRCA genes have a lifetime risk of 56% to 84% of developing breast cancer. Women with the BRCA1 gene also have a 36% to 63% risk of ovarian cancer, and those with BRCA2 have a 10% to 27% risk. And although Meg tested negative, her family history combined with her own recurring suspicious lesions spoke for itself.

And now a new study from JAMA (jama.ama-assn.org) actually proves that a woman may survive longer with preventive surgeries when she has a family history of breast and ovarian cancers.

Here's what researchers found in a study of more than 2,400 women:

- Having a mastectomy may reduce the risk of breast cancer in women with BRCA1 and BRCA2 mutations.

- Performing a salpingo-oophorectomy – removal of both the fallopian tubes and ovaries – was associated with a lower risk of ovarian cancer, a lower risk of breast cancer in women who were never diagnosed with it before, and with a lower rate of early death from any cause, mortality from breast cancer and mortality from ovarian cancer.

These findings should help women with BRCA mutations and their doctors select strategies to reduce a patient's chances of developing breast and gynecological cancers.

The bottom line is lives can be saved

Elizabeth Burnside, MD, UW Hospital Department of Radiology and a breast cancer researcher says, "The research shows that surgery can prevent breast cancers and save lives in women who are at high risk. However, the decision is an individual one. Every woman should weigh the pros and cons of such a surgery with her healthcare team."

I expect women with and without genetic risks will find the results of this research empowering knowing there is something you can do to reduce your risk of dying from breast and ovarian cancer. If you fall within the risk categories, talk to a genetic counselor and/or your oncologist about your options.

What's in Meg's future? She told me of her brave decision to have her ovaries removed within the next two years, nearly eliminating her risk for ovarian cancer. And, at this point, that's all we can hope for, right?

Because it all begins with a healthy woman...

Sue Ann Thompson is founder and president of the Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation (WWHF), a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF provides programs and conducts forums that focus on education, prevention, and early detection of diseases that affect women the most; connects individuals to health resources; produces and distributes the most up-to-date health education and resource materials; and, awards grants and scholarships to women health researchers and related community non-profits. To learn more, visit wwhf.org or call 1-800-448-5148.