

Angelina Jolie Removes Breasts to Prevent Cancer

Correction: *Angelina Jolie's article in the New York Times was published on May 14, not May 21.*

Hi there. Thanks for joining us again on As It Is. I'm Kelly Jean Kelly.

"The fate of mankind ... will rest in the hands of one."

"Ooo."

"Don't start."

Do you recognize that movie? It's "Lara Croft: Tomb Raider." The star is Angelina Jolie. Jolie is famous for a lot of things. Her movies. Her beauty. Her humanitarian work around the world. Her six kids. Her husband-to-be, actor Brad Pitt. This week, Jolie is in the news for deciding to have both her breasts removed.

Jolie published an article on May 21st in the *New York Times* announcing her decision. She explained that her mother died of cancer at age 56. Jolie said her children wanted to know if she would, too. She wrote,

"I have always told them not to worry, but the truth is I carry a 'faulty' gene ... which sharply increases my risk of developing breast cancer and ovarian cancer."

Jolie said genetic tests showed she had an 87 percent chance of getting breast cancer. And, the tests showed she had a 50 percent chance for cancer in the ovaries, which are part of a woman's reproductive system.

So last February Jolie had major surgery to remove her breasts. The surgery took about eight hours. After she recovered, she had another surgery to create two new breasts. She wrote that her children do not see anything that makes them uncomfortable.

"They can see my small scars and that's it," she said. "Everything else is just Mommy, the same as she always was. ... On a personal note, I do not feel any less of a woman. I feel empowered that I made a strong choice that in no way diminished my femininity."

Most importantly, she says her chances of developing breast cancer have dropped to five percent. She says now she can tell her six children that they don't need to be afraid their mother will die of breast cancer.

Genetic Tests Can Help Predict Breast and Ovarian Cancer

Angelina Jolie's decision to have a double mastectomy – to have both her breasts removed – has made many people talk about the risk of breast cancer. Experts at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that around 1.3 million people are diagnosed with breast cancer worldwide each year. VOA's Carol Pearson looked at Jolie's decision and other options available to women who might develop breast cancer. June Simms has her report.

Two major genes are related to breast and ovarian cancer. The genes are called BRCA1 and BRCA2. Doctors have found that changes to these genes can increase the odds of developing breast and ovarian cancer.

Marc Boisvert is a doctor at Medstar Washington Hospital. He says not all women with breast cancer have the BRCA gene change. He says patients with and without the gene change have the same chance of survival. But, Dr. Boisvert notes an important difference in cancer patients who test positive for BRCA1 and BRCA2 gene changes.

"The problem is that these cancers frequently appear in younger women, and younger women tend to have more aggressive cancers, and they're not suspecting them."

Women in their 20s and 30s are not likely to be checked for breast cancer. Usually, women age 40 and above are checked.

The National Cancer Institute recommends getting a genetic test if close relatives have had breast or ovarian cancer. But the results cannot tell you for sure whether or not you will get breast or ovarian cancer. What the tests can do is help scientists understand someone's risk — which is why Jolie said her chance of getting breast cancer was 87 percent. However, genetic testing can cost thousands of dollars.

If a person does learn she has a high risk for developing breast or ovarian cancer, she can choose to have her breasts or ovaries surgically removed before they develop the disease. But Dr. Boisvert says surgery is not the only choice.

"I think education of everyone is important here because I think you can get peace of mind knowing that you are being monitored very carefully and knowing what the numbers are, what the chance of recurrence, for instance, are."

Dr. Boisvert says in the end, the patient needs to be comfortable with her care. He says getting surgery or just watching closely for any signs of disease can both be good choices.

I'm June Simms.

Look Good, Feel Better

We have one more story about dealing with cancer. This one is about women who already have the disease. Chemotherapy and radiation—the common treatments for cancer—can often have side effects. Patients might lose their hair or get red marks on their skin. Jim Tedder tells how some cancer survivors are dealing with the effects of their treatment.

When Cathy Davelli started chemotherapy for breast cancer, she knew her body would change. But the cancer also changed her feelings about herself.

“I lost a piece of who I was. I would walk by the mirror and did not recognize myself.”

The Personal Care Products Council created a program called “Look Good, Feel Better” for cancer survivors like Cathy Davelli. Free classes teach them how to use beauty products to deal with the problems caused by chemotherapy.

The Personal Care Products Council says the beauty care industry donates \$7 to \$10 million worth of products each year for the classes. The Look Good Feel Better program has now helped more than 1.2 million women in 25 countries.

I’m Jim Tedder.

And I’m Kelly Jean Kelly.

What do you think about Angelina Jolie's decision? Send an email to special@voanews.com. Or go to our Facebook page.

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