

MY MEDICAL CHOICE

By Op-Ed Contributor, Angelina Jolie

MY MOTHER FOUGHT CANCER FOR ALMOST A DECADE AND DIED AT 56. SHE HELD OUT LONG ENOUGH TO MEET THE FIRST OF HER GRANDCHILDREN AND TO HOLD THEM IN HER ARMS. BUT MY OTHER CHILDREN WILL NEVER HAVE THE CHANCE TO EXPERIENCE HOW LOVING AND GRACIOUS SHE WAS.

We often speak of “Mommy’s mommy,” and I find myself trying to explain the illness that took her away from us. They have asked if the same could happen to me. I have always told them not to worry, but the truth is I carry a “faulty” gene, BRCA1, which sharply increases my risk of developing breast cancer as well as ovarian cancer.

My doctors estimated that I had an 87 percent risk of breast cancer and a 50 percent risk of ovarian cancer, although the risk is radically different in the case of each woman.

Only a fraction of breast cancers result from an inherited gene mutation. Those with a defect in BRCA1 have a 65 percent risk of getting it, on average. Once I knew that this was my reality, I decided to be proactive and to minimize the risk as much I could. I made a decision to have a preventive double mastectomy. I started with the breasts, as my risk of breast cancer is higher than my risk of ovarian cancer, and the surgery is more complex.

My own process began on Feb. 2 with a procedure known as a “nipple delay,” which rules out disease in the breast ducts behind the nipple and draws extra blood flow to the area. This causes some pain and a lot of bruising, but it increases the chance of saving the nipple. Two weeks later I had the major surgery, where the breast tissue is removed and temporary fillers are put in place. The operation can take eight hours. You wake up with drain tubes and expanders in your breasts. It does feel like a scene out of a science-fiction film. But days after surgery you can be back to a normal life. Nine weeks later, the final surgery is completed with the reconstruction of the breasts with an implant. There have been many advances in this procedure in the last few years, and the results can be beautiful.

For any woman reading this, I hope it helps you to know you have options. I want to encourage every woman, especially if you have a family history of breast or ovarian cancer, to seek out the information and medical experts who can help you through this aspect of your life, and to make your own informed choices. Breast cancer alone kills some 458,000 people each year, according to the World Health Organization, mainly in low- and middle-income countries. It has got to be a priority to ensure that more women can access gene testing and lifesaving preventive treatment, whatever their means, wherever they live.

I choose not to keep my story private because there are many women who do not know that they might be living under the shadow of cancer. It is my hope that they, too, will be able to get gene tested, and that if they have a high risk they, too, will know that they have strong options.

LIFE COMES WITH MANY CHALLENGES.
THE ONES THAT SHOULD NOT SCARE US ARE THE ONES WE CAN TAKE ON AND TAKE CONTROL OF.