



The relief was instant. As I woke from surgery after having both of my breasts removed, I felt a rush of happiness – I was free. It might seem strange to wake from a massive operation with a smile on your face but at that moment I knew I no longer had to live in fear of developing breast cancer. Don't get me wrong, it wasn't easy making such a huge choice, to have both my breasts removed when I wasn't sick; but knowing that my risk of developing breast cancer had dropped from 80 to 1 per cent made it worth it.

I carry the BRCA1 gene, which is an inherited fault gene that increases the risk of developing breast and ovarian cancer. My mum carried the gene too, and when I was 22, she died of breast cancer after a three-year battle with it. Despite having regular mammograms, the tumour went undetected until it was advanced-level breast cancer. That's when she discovered that she carried BRCA1.

During her illness, she told my younger sister, now 25, and I that she hoped we'd get tested to see if we carried the gene. Mum had never had that opportunity. I really didn't want to think about whether or not I had BRCA1 when I was in my early twenties. All I wanted was to forget about it and have fun. I knew that I'd find out eventually, but I wasn't ready to face it. I lived overseas for a few years and tried not to think about it. After I came home, it began to creep into my mind. I just knew I wouldn't stop thinking about it until I found out I had the gene or not.

When I was 27, I got the first blood test. At the time, I saw a genetic counsellor, which isn't like a normal doctor's appointment, it's much more emotional. You have to talk through what would happen if you have BRCA1 and, if you do, the choices you have as a result. Their job is to prepare you and ensure you really want to do the

genetic test, because the results can have such a huge impact on your life. Then you have another blood test to confirm that you have the gene, the results of which take two months to come back.

I didn't have a huge reaction when I found out I had the gene; I was numb. The full magnitude only really hit me days later as I realised I couldn't just avoid it anymore. Ever since my mum passed away, I always had this feeling that I had the BRCA1 gene, but now I knew for sure. It wasn't fun at all but it's not a death sentence. I have a fault that means I may or may not get cancer one day – it just increases my chances.

Surgery wasn't an instant choice for me. I started out by just absorbing all the information I could and thinking about everything. I opted for set surveillance, which involves ultrasounds and MRIs every six months to closely monitor your health and detect cancer at the earliest possible moment. But I only did it twice.

After a year of surveillance, I realised I couldn't live like that. Every time I was at the hospital I'd be thinking to myself, 'What if they find something?' It was extremely stressful, I didn't want to go through life with that kind of anxiety. I've always been the kind of person who'd just get something out of the way and do it, if I could. I'd rather the short term kind of pain than having something like that going around my head constantly.

Besides, my mum dutifully attended her breast screening appointments and so I knew it was no guarantee that they would actually catch any problems earlier. The BCRA1 gene causes any cancer you develop to be fast-moving, so it scared me to think even screening may not detect it. It was the worst seeing my mum so ill, giving her everything to fighting cancer but then losing the battle anyway. I just didn't want to go through that and for Dad to have to watch another person in the family suffer.

Leading up to the surgery, I had my doubts. There were times when I thought maybe I shouldn't do it, that it was crazy, or that maybe I should wait another year. Every day I kept changing my mind and I was constantly thinking, 'Why am I doing something so radical when I'm not even sick?' I didn't tell a lot of people because I didn't want anyone to talk me out of it. It was my decision and I needed to own it.

The surgery is pretty extensive – it's a long, three-month process and involves two invasive procedures plus recovery time. Because I'm young I had a much lower risk of infections and complications. I had two surgeons – a breast surgeon and a plastic surgeon. The first's primary concern is with the medical

side of things (he just wants to make sure all of the tissue is removed). But then you still want to have nice breasts after the surgery, so that's where the plastic surgeon comes in. I was quite young to be getting it done, but more and more women are choosing to go through with it in their twenties because the younger you are, the more quickly you recover. Before surgery and during recovery I found Pink Hope's site and Facebook group invaluable. It was great to be able to connect with people who knew what I was experiencing. It helped me prepare for everything from knowing what to pack for hospital to things like why I had post-op swelling. To have that support from people who'd done it was just the biggest help.

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I'm a year out from surgery now and I've never doubted that I made the right choice for me, and now I feel like I'm in control of my body. Physically, I often forget it even happened. My body has fully recovered now, and there's nothing I can't do that I didn't do before.

When you live in fear of illness and then that fear has gone, you learn to value simply being healthy, and that's the best thing you can hope for. My sister is currently living overseas at the moment. She's not ready for the test yet – just like I wasn't. But it feels good to know that I've given her a bit more confidence to think maybe she should take it.

My whole perspective has shifted since I had surgery. I've changed emotionally and mentally. If I can get through my mother passing away and dealing with my own mortality – which in my opinion are two of the worst things that someone could endure – everything else doesn't seem as big anymore. 🌸

ARE YOU AT RISK?

Hopefully Ally's story has inspired you to be proactive about breast-cancer detection, check out Pink Hope's website for more information, real-life stories and support. Make sure that you head to the 'Navigating Your Risk?' questionnaire, which is your first step in discovering more about your breast health. See pinkhope.org.au for more.

“I had a mastectomy, but I don't have cancer”

After discovering that she had the BRCA1 gene, Ally, 30, tells us why making the choice to remove her breasts was the best decision she's ever made.



One year after her surgery, Ally is now living a life free of fear.