

Posted: Fri 3:52 AM, Oct 26, 2012

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Updated: Fri 3:32 PM, Oct 26, 2012

Breast Cancer 'Pre-vivors'

Tallahassee, FL - Sarah Brown has 5 generations of breast cancer in her family. Every single woman on her mother's side has been diagnosed and her mom is the only survivor. Brown admits "once I hit about 30, I was not looking forward to my birthday's anymore, every year I had a birthday I was convinced that would be the year that I would be diagnosed with breast cancer." About five to ten percent of breast cancer is hereditary or due to inherited cancer syndromes and about 70 percent of that 10 percent is due to BRCA-1 or BRCA-2. Dr. Kristin Parsley, According to Dr. Kristin Parsley, a specialist in clinical genetics, "what we look for is patterns in the family to see if there's earlier onset breast cancers throughout one or the other side of the families so it could come from the mothers side, it could come from the fathers side."



Sarah has a 5 year old son and an 11 year old daughter and has been upfront and honest with them about their family history and her choice to have a prophylactic mastectomy which can drastically reduce her chances of getting breast cancer. Brown says "she asked me one day "Mommy can I get breast cancer?" and I said honey it's in our family and you saw what Mommy did and I'm okay so she knows that that's an option for her." Although some children may be at a higher risk than others of eventually being diagnosed with breast cancer, doctors do not recommend testing in young children or adolescents because they want the individual to have an informed consent and make an informed decision. Some men and women inherit the risk of getting breast cancer and are forced with making a decision on how to treat it before they even get it, these "previvors" turn to genetic testing to reduce their risk. According to Parsley, "the test that they do currently, you can do it via blood or via buckle swab which is a spit test. They are basically taking cells from the sides of your cheeks and they send it off to this particular lab that does all of the BRCA-1 and 2 testing in the country."

If you are tested and the results come back positive with a BRCA-1 or BRCA-2 gene. You have options. Taking a drug called Tamoxifen for 5 years can reduce your risk of breast cancer by 50 percent, a prophylactic mastectomy can reduce your breast cancer risk by 90 percent and a prophylactic oophorectomy, which is removal of the ovaries can reduce your breast cancer risk by 50 percent as well as decrease your ovarian cancer risk. Parsley thinks "genetics not only helps you if you have a predisposition to cancer but even the people who don't have a predisposition to breast cancer but happen to get breast cancer, the molecular targeting when they basically map the genomic landscape of the tumor, even if you are 62, can allow them to better treat you and give you higher survival rates."