

# Woman's Day

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# the pros and cons of genetic testing

**O** Did you inherit an increased risk of cancer? BRCA gene testing can help answer that question, but it's not as clear-cut as you may think. The test checks for mutations that increase your risk of developing breast and ovarian cancer (or of having a recurrence)—but that risk can vary from 35 to 85% for breast cancer and 11 to 63% for ovarian cancer. And a negative result doesn't necessarily mean that you're safe. To shed light on this issue, we asked two breast cancer survivors who've had BRCA testing to share their stories.

## it saved my life

by Melody Campiglio, as told to Barbara Brody



**I never thought** I'd get genetic testing, despite the fact that my sister and two

aunts had breast cancer. My sister, who was diagnosed at age 37, refused to even consider it. She didn't want to know—and I didn't either. What would be the point of finding out that I was a walking time bomb?

That changed two years ago, when my routine mammogram showed an abnormality. My doctor wasn't worried, but given my family history, I was. So I got second and third opinions.

When an MRI confirmed that something was suspicious, I realized that having the BRCA test could help me figure out how much danger I was in. I ended up having a biopsy and genetic testing on the same day—my 48th birthday. The findings: early-stage breast cancer, BRCA2-positive.

My doctor recommended a mastectomy, but left it up to me to decide whether to remove one or both breasts. I agonized up until

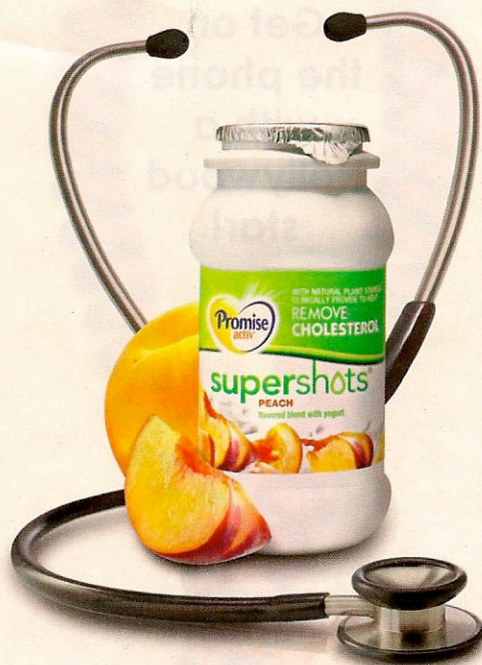
the last minute—literally. When I saw the surgeon the morning of my operation, I told him, "We're doing both." If I hadn't known that I was BRCA-positive, there's no way I would have done that.

Soon after, my doctor also convinced me to remove my ovaries and fallopian tubes to lower my risk of ovarian cancer. When she told me that she'd found precancerous cells in my fallopian tubes, I was floored—that kind of cancer is almost never caught so early.

Since all this happened, my sister has changed her mind about genetic testing, too. She also tested positive for the BRCA2 mutation.

What's helped me through all this is connecting with other women in similar situations. FORCE (Facing Our Risk of Cancer Empowered; [facingourrisk.org](http://facingourrisk.org)) has been a wonderful resource for that. Being able to bounce questions off other members has been great. I don't always like the answers I get—but that just encourages me to look for more information, and I've come to realize that information is power. ►

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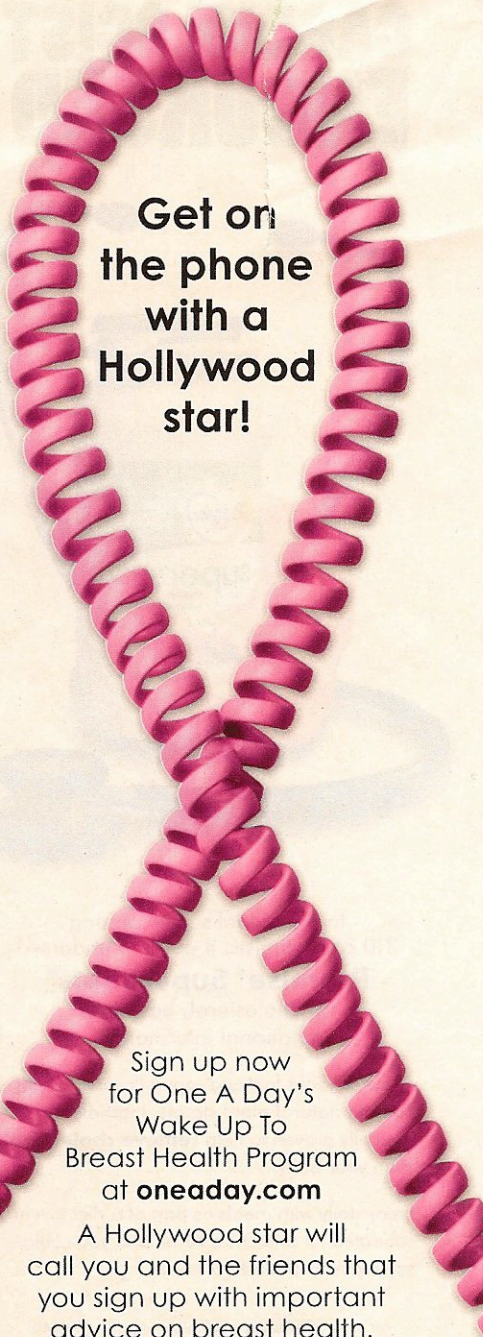
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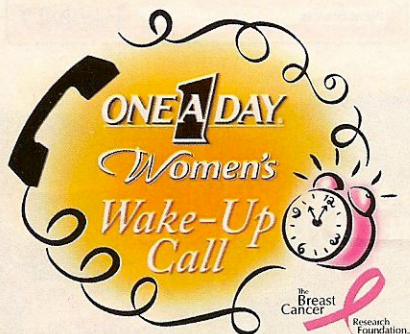
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## what the test didn't predict

by Karen M. Lynch



**In February 2006**, I opened my mailbox and a wave of relief washed over me. A

letter, on official Yale Cancer Center stationery, informed me that I had tested negative for the BRCA1 and BRCA2 gene mutations.

Two years earlier, when I was 35, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Because women who get breast cancer before age 40 have a higher chance of carrying a genetic abnormality, my doctors suggested genetic testing. If I was carrying a BRCA gene mutation, my chances of having a recurrence—as well as my chances of developing ovarian cancer—would be higher. There would also be a much greater chance that my mother, sisters and nieces were at risk.

When I learned that I was BRCA-negative, I assumed we were all in the clear. But just five weeks later I went for a checkup and learned that my cancer had come back.

Furious, I fired off an e-mail to the genetic counselor, telling her the test was wrong. In her kind and empathetic response, she reminded me that the test didn't guarantee I wouldn't have a recurrence, or even that I didn't have another mutation (perhaps one that hasn't even been discovered yet) that predisposed me to breast cancer. It simply concluded that I didn't carry a BRCA mutation.

Soon after my recurrence, my mother learned that she had ovarian cancer. Fortunately, it hadn't spread, and today she's healthy. Yet I wondered: If I had tested positive for a BRCA gene mutation, would my mom have been diagnosed even earlier? Did my test results give us a false sense of security?

Two years have passed since my breast cancer recurrence, and I've since had a full hysterectomy to lower my ovarian cancer risk. Each year I grow more confident that I'm here to stay, but I worry about my family. I pray that if anyone else is diagnosed, it's early. I remind my sisters all the time: You can't judge your risk by my BRCA status. **wd**

## SURVIVORS TELL ALL

These books are must-reads for anyone who wants to understand what it's like to cope with breast cancer.

- **Crazy Sexy Cancer Tips**, by Kris Carr (Skirt, 2007). Advice, lessons learned, and lots of humor.
- **Five Lessons I Didn't Learn From Breast Cancer (And One Big One I Did)**, by Shelley Lewis (New American Library, 2008). An irreverent look at the "pinkapalooza" phenomenon, minus the spiritual awakening.
- **Dr. Susan Love's Breast Book**, by Susan M. Love, MD (Da Capo Press, 2005). The breast cancer "bible."
- **Why I Wore Lipstick To My Mastectomy**, by GERALYN LUCAS (St. Martin's Press, 2004). A frank, funny, yet serious tale of a 27-year-old woman with cancer in a beauty-obsessed culture. **B.K.**