

BREAST CANCER IS NOT YOUR FAULT

- **No-one knows what causes breast cancer**
- **You are not responsible for your breast cancer**
- **You don't have to feel guilty about any increased risk to your daughter**
- **Lumps sometimes get missed – it's not your fault**

No-one knows what causes breast cancer. We know that certain faulty genes increase the risk of getting breast cancer, but not everyone who carries the fault will get the disease. Nor will every woman who had her first child after she was thirty, every woman who is stressed, keeps her emotions bottled up, drinks more than eight standard alcoholic drinks a week or has a poor diet.

All of these factors and many more besides may influence the development of breast cancer. With the right research, someone could probably present convincing evidence suggesting that women who listened to the Beatles are more likely to develop breast cancer.

My grandmother and my maternal aunt both had breast cancer when they were relatively young, which suggested there might be a genetic link. After my treatment I had a blood test which showed that I am, indeed, carrying a faulty BRCA2 gene. That still doesn't explain why I went on to develop cancer when others with the mutation don't.

The doctor read out the result of the fine needle biopsy to a woman I know. It was positive. He then asked how old she was when she had her first child. When she told him 32 he raised his eyebrows and muttered 'Well, then...', as if breast cancer were the price she had to pay for not having her first baby in her teens or early twenties.

Her first message about breast cancer was that it was her own fault. It wasn't.

Breast cancer is not a price you have to pay It could have been because I have, at various times of my life, drunk far too much, smoked like a chimney and lived on chocolate. It could have been because I had all four of my children in my thirties, or because I was nurturing some deep and unrecognised resentment. It could have been all or none of these things. It doesn't matter. There's nothing I can do to change my past. What matters is what I do now to manage my future.

Do you have a 'cancer personality'?

People who don't have cancer may take comfort in believing that they're different from people who do. One way of protecting themselves is to imagine that you have a 'cancer personality' – in other words, a personality that is totally different from their own.

You may have read descriptions of the cancer-prone person and you may even think it sounds a bit like you. But, unless you are you prepared to believe that every woman everywhere in the world who gets breast cancer has a personality identical to your own, you have to let go

of the idea that you brought cancer on yourself by having the 'wrong' one.

Unless you took yourself into a laboratory and injected your breast with vast amounts of proven, tumour-inducing substances, there is no possible reason for you to feel responsible for your breast cancer.

There's no point in worrying about your past

When I was 21 I had an extremely cavalier attitude to my health. If someone had told me then that, unless I changed my ways, I would be diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 47, I would have laughed at them. I'd have assumed there would be a cure by then – or that I'd either be dead already or too old to care.

Most of us wish we'd done at least some things differently when we were younger but we weren't the same people then. We can't blame ourselves for not being as sensible then as we are now.

You don't have to feel guilty about any increased risk to your daughter

One newly-diagnosed woman was told by her doctor 'You do know this makes it more likely that your daughter will get breast cancer, don't you?' This was not only unnecessarily cruel, it was very unlikely to be true.

Yes, if your daughter has inherited a genetic mutation from you she is statistically more likely to develop the disease. However, as only five per cent of all breast cancers appear to be due to a genetic malfunction, the chances of this happening are remote. Even if it were the case, not every woman who carries the gene will

develop breast cancer. And it's hardly your choice – so there would absolutely no point in feeling guilty about it.

On the positive side, you will no doubt encourage your daughter to adopt the same, more optimistic outlook and healthier lifestyle that you are developing now. You will probably encourage regular screening. She may listen, she may not. You can't force good health on her. Painful as it can be to accept, there's only so much you can do to protect her, but that still doesn't make anything your fault.

When I discovered that I was carrying a BRCA2 mutation my daughter was 14 year old.

What I wanted to do was have her screened without telling her, find that she hadn't inherited the gene fault and breathe a big sigh of relief. Of course, there's no way a parent can have a child screened without his or her consent, and there's no way a child can give consent until he or she is 18. So I decided there was absolutely no point in raising the subject until then, if I raised it at all.

In the meantime, I did my best to discourage her from following the self-destructive behaviours once so beloved by her mother. I encouraged her to eat well, do some exercise and to avoid cigarettes.

By her 18th birthday I still wasn't sure that telling her was the right thing. I was worried that I might inadvertently plant the idea in her mind that breast cancer was inevitable for her, particularly as her great aunt died from the disease when she was only 22. But in the end I decided I didn't have the right to keep information from her that might in any way affect the choices she made, particularly in terms of screening.

I didn't choose to put her in a situation where she might have an increased chance of developing breast

cancer. Whatever else I feel, I know there's no reason to feel guilty for that, and the same is true for you.

Lumps sometimes get missed – it's not your fault

If your cancer was no longer considered to be 'early' at the time of diagnosis, you may be blaming yourself for being less than vigilant. It's true that, when it comes to surviving breast cancer, early detection remains our most powerful ally. It's also true that no one method of detection is 100 per cent effective.

As I have a family history of breast cancer I had a mammogram every two years from the age of forty. I checked my breasts every day after the shower as I was applying moisturiser because the more familiar I was with the way they looked and felt, the more likely I was to pick up the smallest change. I also had a doctor examine my breasts each time I had a Pap test.

My very competent and thorough GP examined my breasts three weeks before I discovered a seven centimetre lump under one nipple. Later, my surgeon told me that it had probably been developing for around two years – yet I would swear that it appeared overnight.

My GP was horrified by the thought that she had missed a lump of that size but I don't for a minute think she did. It either couldn't be felt, or was indistinguishable from the normal, lumpy tissue in the other breast.

As far as mammograms were concerned, it was difficult to separate the lump from the surrounding, dense tissue even on the final diagnostic x-ray. While most lumps are not nearly so hard to find, it's hardly surprising that mine had been overlooked.

So, while I was concerned to discover that my cancer had spread into seven lymph nodes, I can accept that a tumour can remain undetected even after the most thorough routine screening.

Know what you're looking for

One thing that surprised me was the way my lump felt. I had always imagined that the thing I was hoping not to find would be spherical and distinct – like a pea under the skin. In fact mine was long and irregular, remarkably like normal glandular breast tissue.

I think it's important to pass on to friends and daughters that lumps come in all shapes and sizes.

What matters is that you've decided to live well now

Some women are so afraid of finding out that they have cancer that they deliberately delay diagnosis. Others stay quiet because they are terrified that they will lose their husband or partner along with a breast, or lose their chance of having children, or of forming a meaningful relationship if they are single.

If this was your choice, you may now be finding it hard to live with, especially if you believe your prognosis would be better if you had acted more swiftly.

Think of this. Some women choose to die rather than confront their fear. You are not one of them. However long it took, whatever your reasons for waiting, you found the courage to act. And you have now chosen to do the best you can to live well.

It doesn't matter how you came to this point. The best possible thing you can do is accept your choices and put them behind you.