

Family history can increase a woman's risk of breast cancer, but family can give her the strength to survive it

Pam was only 43 years old when she was diagnosed with breast cancer.

She says she was disappointed, but not surprised. Most women, especially young women like her, would be shocked. But she has had several close family members diagnosed with breast cancer, which makes it more likely that she herself would have breast cancer.

"I was diagnosed at the same age my mom was, and in the same breast," she says. In addition to her mother, a maternal aunt and a cousin had also had breast cancer before the age of 45.

A family history of breast cancer increases a woman's chance of getting breast cancer. Because of what she knew about her family, Pam had been getting yearly mammograms since her twenties. In 2013, she found a lump in between her yearly mammograms. Doctors did a biopsy and the biopsy came back malignant. "Sure, I was scared," Pam says. "Cancer is a frightening thing."

Pam started with treatment right away. "I knew my family history, but I had also witnessed the strength and survivorship of my family members," she says. She was determined to fight the cancer with everything she had.

Doctors started Pam on chemotherapy. After eight treatments, the lump had shrunk to almost nothing. Then, she had a lumpectomy and lymph node biopsy and started radiation therapy.

Pam says that her family and friends were invaluable over the course of the treatment. Family members and co-workers sat with her during her chemotherapy treatments. They brought her food and helped look after her house when she wasn't able to do it. "You sometimes just have to let people help you," Pam says.

Since then, the cancer has not returned. There is always a chance it could come back. "When you're taking the medicine, you feel like you have all this power against the cancer, but when you stop it's like 'now what?'" says Pam. She says she has to get used to a "new normal" routine, which includes frequent mammograms and MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) scans. She continues to eat healthy foods and exercise and tries to keep her stress levels low.

Importantly, she also reminds her younger sister to keep up with her screening because of their family history.

Pam's advice for women dealing with the diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer: "You can't tell them not to be upset or afraid, because it *is* a scary diagnosis. You're going to have your highs and your lows; some days you're going to feel well and some days you won't," she says. "Take it one day at a time."

There are resources for women who may have a family history of breast cancer or certain genetic traits, which can raise their risk of getting breast cancer. Find out more at CDC's [Bring Your Brave](#) campaign.

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