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Charlene Cunningham isn't giving breast cancer a chance.



Two of Charlene's great-aunts died of breast cancer, her grandmother died of ovarian cancer, and two aunts are breast and ovarian cancer survivors.

"Cancer has been lurking over my shoulder my entire life," says Charlene, 40.

Charlene and her sisters and cousins were tested for breast cancer risk, and 16 of the 20, including Charlene and three sisters, tested positive for the breast cancer susceptibility gene, BRCA.

About 5 to 10 percent of breast cancer is hereditary, often caused by a mutation in the BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene. Risk increases in families with cases of breast cancer and cases of both breast and ovarian cancer.

Banner MD Anderson Cancer Center's Clinical Cancer Genetic Program in Gilbert coordinates genetic testing and health surveillance for patients with hereditary cancer syndromes. The Breast Cancer Program offers services in screening, treatment, support and recovery.

Genetic counseling before and after testing is vital, says Mary Cianfrocca, DO, FACP. Cianfrocca is Director of Banner MD Anderson's Breast Cancer Program and is Medical Director of the Clinical Cancer Genetics Program.

When testing is positive for a mutation, a medical oncologist will counsel the patient on treatments.

"If you have the information, you can decide how you want to manage your risk," Cianfrocca says.

In addition to surveillance and medications, treatment options for patients with a genetic mutation includes prophylactic, or preventive, surgery. A prophylactic mastectomy lowers breast cancer risk by as much as 90 percent. The prophylactic salpingo-oophorectomy, which removes fallopian tubes and ovaries, lowers breast cancer risk by 50 percent.

Charlene had a salpingo-oophorectomy in 2012. She went to Banner MD Anderson in April for a double mastectomy and initial reconstructive surgery.

"I have two more follow-up appointments, final reconstructive surgery at the end of August and, then, done," Charlene says.

Charlene is a high school teacher and part-time community college instructor raising 10-year-old twin sons and a daughter, 14, on her own. "I have to be there for those babies of mine," she says.

She adds, for a cancer patient, Banner MD Anderson is the place to be.

"I have loved everything about it," she says. "I have a team of doctors. They meet to discuss this comprehensive care. You can do all the blood work here, the surgery prep, everything. I'm so lucky I have this place."