

Joanna Rudnick's Story



Joanna Rudnick doesn't have cancer, and she hopes she never will. But her mother and grandmother and great grandmother all had either breast or ovarian cancer. Joanna also has a gene mutation of one of the BRCA genes, which are commonly known as the breast cancer genes.

She knows that combination of family history and genetic mutation put her at high risk for cancer.

“My BRCA1 mutation gives me an up to 60 percent lifetime risk of getting ovarian cancer and up to an even higher risk of getting breast cancer. The risk for the general population is something like 1.3 percent for ovarian cancer and about 12.7 percent for breast cancer. If women have a BRCA mutation, they should know they are predisposed to getting cancer.”

Let's talk about cancer and genetic mutations; they're nothing to be embarrassed about

That's one of the messages Joanna Rudnick would like to get out about ovarian cancer and the BRCA gene mutations. She wants people to talk about it. She is so passionate about it that she has produced a documentary, [In the Family](#), in which she frankly discusses her experience with ovarian cancer screening and being BRCA positive and talks with other women who have had similar experiences.

“Ovarian cancer has always carried a stigma, which is one reason that women like me with strong family histories didn't always know they had a family history. Breaking the silence is so key. I feel grateful to be living in a time when I can get a transvaginal ultrasound on camera and it's OK because it's part of what I'm doing to prevent ovarian cancer, or, more accurately, to catch it early if I were to develop it.”

Catching ovarian cancer early is so important

Successfully treating ovarian cancer is much easier when it's caught early. And though there aren't any sure fire ways to prevent it or to detect it early, there are ways to decrease risk of both getting ovarian cancer and of dying from it.

Joanna is part of the [Northwestern Early Detection and Prevention Program \(NOCEDPP\)](#) at Northwestern Memorial Hospital.

“Every six months, I get a transvaginal ultrasound and a CA125 blood test. In addition, I get a comprehensive health history and a full gynecologic exam and a breast exam. I always feel good walking away from those appointments.”

She thinks awareness is key

Joanna thinks it's so important that everyone know that there are [symptoms of ovarian cancer](#).

“Now that we know there are symptoms, we need to pay attention to them, and we shouldn’t be afraid to talk to our doctors about it.”

In fact, her mother had symptoms, and because she didn’t ignore them, doctors found her ovarian cancer early, and she has been cancer free for more than 20 years.

Recently, the [National Ovarian Cancer Alliance](#) came out with a statement about ovarian cancer symptoms. They are:

- Bloating
- Pelvic or abdominal pain
- Difficulty eating or feeling full quickly
- Urinary symptoms (urgency or frequency)

Increased abdominal size is also a common symptom. Women with ovarian cancer report that symptoms are new, persistent and represent a change from what they normally feel.

What women can do about their risk

Joanna is part of NOCEDPP, but she also takes birth control pills to reduce her risk, and she will have her ovaries removed once she’s had children. She does other things too. “I definitely exercise more. I do Yoga, which is also to be able to handle the risk and live with uncertainty and risk. I take vitamin D and fish oil, and I’m always scouring for more information that could be helpful.”

“I do these things to embrace my body and not fight against it. I try to be less stressed, enjoy my life and realize what a gift it is to have this information rather than being upset about it.”

There are other things women can do to [reduce their risk](#) of getting ovarian cancer, and just knowing those risks is a good first step. Join with Joanna and thousands of other women who are arming themselves with knowledge about ovarian cancer and spread the word to others. That knowledge could save your life or the life of someone you love. And don’t be afraid to talk to your doctor if you feel symptoms that aren’t normal.

Contact

If you or a loved one has been told you **may have** or **do have** ovarian cancer, and you’d like to be evaluated or treated by one of the [gynecologic oncologists](#) at Northwestern Memorial, call **312-695-0990**. An intake nurse will help you decide if a gynecologic cancer specialist is the right doctor for you, and may ask for your medical records or doctor’s referral.

If you don’t have a doctor or would like to make an appointment with a gynecologist for the first time, call **1-877-926-4664** or [request an appointment online](#).

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