

Script – Print – Cancer diagnosis – “All part of a bigger plan”

Terri Odell has never had any serious health problems. She can't even remember ever calling in sick to work. The Rockford, Illinois native attributes her good fortune to leading an active lifestyle that started when she was a young child and continued into adulthood – working out, running marathons and now owning a personal training business.

So, when she found a lump in her breast in December 2023, the 63-year-old Odell was stunned.

“That's the hardest thing for me but also the biggest benefit for me,” she says. “I know that my body's very strong, and it's extremely healthy, except for that little bit of cancer that's moving through it. But it does make me feel a lot more secure that everything's going to be okay. And that's a big part of getting better is to believe in it and to keep yourself going.”

Family history

Cancer is no stranger to Odell's family. Her mother passed away from ovarian cancer when Odell was three years old. Odell, who had seven siblings, lost two sisters to lung cancer, and she has an aunt and cousin who've battled ductal carcinoma. The fear of cancer was always in the back of Odell's mind.

Her lump turned out to be triple negative breast cancer, which is a cancer of the breast that does not have hormone receptors, such as estrogen and progesterone, that are found in most breast cancers. Triple negative breast cancer is usually diagnosed in women younger than 45.

“We see it in about 15% of breast cancer patients,” says Peggy Rogers, a nurse practitioner in genetics and medical oncology for OSF HealthCare. Rogers did not treat Odell but has cared for many patients with a similar diagnosis. “These patients are treated with chemotherapy and immunotherapy, and we offer genetic testing to these women who are diagnosed with these cancers because they tend to be aggressive.”

Odell carries the BRCA1 gene, which increases the risk for ovarian cancer. It turns out that Odell had a tumor in her fallopian tube, so she had oophorectomy, which is surgery to remove one or both ovaries. “BRCA” stands for “BReast CAncer gene.” BRCA1 and BRCA2 are two different genes that have been found to impact a person's chances of developing breast cancer. Odell had a lumpectomy to remove the cancerous tumor in her breast.

Rogers says women will often consider having a mastectomy on the affected breast or bilateral mastectomy to remove both breasts and reduce the elevated risk of a potential second breast cancer. “If they don't have breast cancer, but they're diagnosed with the BRCA 1 gene, we put them on heightened surveillance with a mammogram, alternating with a breast MRI every six months,” she says.

Now, Odell is spreading the important message of genetic testing. And no better time than the present. October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month.

“You know, people are asking me about breast cancer, but I try to tell them it's not about that. It's really about the BRCA gene,” Odell says. “That's the serious part of the whole disease. And that's the part that I want to get people to understand.”

Genetic testing

Genetic testing helps determine the chances of developing a disease in the future. Rogers says the purpose of genetic testing in the case of breast cancer is to detect a BRCA1 or BRCA2 mutation or other breast cancer genes in your DNA, which indicates a higher risk for developing cancer.

"Any woman who has a family history of three women affected with breast cancer, one under the age of 50, on the same side of the family, would be appropriate for a genetic referral," says Rogers. "Or breast cancer and ovarian cancer is a red flag and is a good reason for a woman to come in for a risk evaluation." In addition, any woman with triple negative breast cancer, male breast cancer or Ashkenazi Jewish ancestry should be tested. And family history of ovarian cancer, pancreatic cancer or metastatic prostate cancer would also be appropriate for risk evaluation.

Genetic testing can be done using blood or saliva samples. Results are usually available within three to four weeks.

Rogers says if a person tests positive for a pathogenic variant in BRCA, she should inform all her first-degree relatives, including children, because there's a 50/50 chance they could inherit the gene, but it's also important to share the information with other family members on the affected side of the family.

Training for the biggest race of her life

As for Odell, she remains optimistic that better days are ahead. She's still training her clients and continuing to push herself with her own rigorous workouts.

"I'm making [cancer] my marathon," she says of fighting cancer. "It's the same kind of thinking – eating right, getting sleep and doing the best for your body."

And she's involved with cancer-related events and activities, spreading the word about prevention and genetic testing. In fact, most of her surviving siblings have now been tested. Odell says there will be no more surprises in her family when it comes to cancer.

"It's hard to hear that diagnosis," she says. "There was a lot of sadness. I went to a few dark places, but you have to come out of it and believe there's something bigger out there. There's a bigger plan. I believe that."

For more information on genetic testing, visit [OSF HealthCare](#).