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Healthy ovaries removed to reduce cancer risk

- by: Linda Cann
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Cathie Dixon and her children Amber, Samuel and Luke. Picture: Theo Fakos

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WA women are having healthy ovaries removed to prevent ovarian cancer before it can develop, as the rate of the disease has jumped almost 50 per cent in the last decade.

The preventative surgery is much like mastectomies performed to avoid breast cancer.

The latest figures from the Health Department's cancer registry show that 117 WA women were diagnosed with ovarian cancer in 2009 – up from 80 in 1999.

Experts say the increase is partly due to the ageing population, but 38-year-old Cathy Dixon knows all too well that it can strike at any age and had her ovaries removed last month, despite no sign of the disease.

Mrs Dixon's mother was diagnosed with ovarian cancer at the age of 34 and testing revealed they both had a mutant gene that increases the risk of the disease by up to 60 per cent.

The BRCA2 gene also means an 80 per cent higher likelihood of developing breast cancer.

After having four children, Mrs Dixon decided it was time to address the “ticking time bomb” hanging over her.

“Because my mum got it at 34, that was the hot spot for me,” Mrs Dixon said. “When you have cancer dangling over you, every twinge I had in my stomach or chest or feeling of unwellness was a huge worry.

She made the drastic decision to have her breasts removed last year and then her ovaries four weeks ago, consequently plunging her into menopause more than 15 years earlier than the average age.

“After the operation it was a huge relief, like a weight was lifted,” Mrs Dixon said.

“For me it was a decision between life and death so it was a really easy decision to make.

“When I had my children I made the decision that I needed to do whatever I had to - to be around for them.

“Cancer has been a big part of my life - my grandmother died of breast cancer when my mum was only five years old, my mum got cancer when I was 7 and my aunty had breast cancer.

“So when you see first-hand people go through cancer, you want to do whatever you can to avoid it. Seeing the impact on a family, you wouldn’t wish that on anyone.

“I think I’m incredibly blessed and lucky to live in an age where I could be tested and my daughter can be tested.”

Gynaecologic oncologist Stuart Salfinger said removing a woman’s healthy ovaries was a drastic step, but was the best defence against cancer for those with the faulty gene because the disease was extremely hard to detect.

Ovarian cancer could affect any woman with or without the mutant gene, with patients as young as 13 diagnosed with the disease.

“Women who have a high risk family history should be tested,” Dr Salfinger said. “We’re getting an increasing number of women who are having the genetic mutation detected and they then know they have a high lifetime risk of breast and ovarian cancer.”

The survival rate for ovarian cancer sufferers is low because symptoms are vague and diagnosis often comes too late – only 30 per cent of women live for more than five years after being diagnosed with the disease.

Prof Yee Leung, a gynaecologic oncologist, said there had been a rising trend in ovarian cancer rates

over the last 10 years in WA mainly because of the ageing population.

For more information and support go to Ovarian Cancer Australia: www.ovariancancer.net.au

To donate to ovarian cancer research go to the Women and Infants Research Foundation:
www.wirf.com.au

OVARIAN CANCER SYMPTOMS:

The symptoms most frequently reported are:

Abdominal or pelvic pain

Increased abdominal size or persistent abdominal bloating

Needing to urinate often or urgently

Difficulty eating or feeling full quickly
