



Opposite page: Moira Walsh enjoys leading a healthy, active life with partner Andrew Schacht, son Zander (12) and Possum the dog.

AS SEEN IN
SALIFE

TAKING CONTROL

One Adelaide woman made a choice that many people would find inconceivable. However, the decision to manage her situation has released her from a lifetime of worry.

IT IS WIDELY KNOWN that early detection of certain cancers can dramatically improve the prognosis for recovery. However, for some individuals, prevention is better than cure. In the case of breast cancer, this can mean major surgery.

Moira Walsh had always lived with the knowledge that she faced a higher than average risk of contracting certain cancers. When Moira was just two, her mother died of breast cancer aged 38. Ironically, Moira was around the same age when she discovered a small lump in one breast and went to her GP for advice. Her doctor reassured her that

the lump was nothing but, given her family history of both breast cancer and ovarian cancer, suggested she consider genetic testing.

"I was given the news in January 2014 that I had the BRCA2 gene mutation," says Moira. Part of our DNA, the BRCA2 gene produces tumour-suppressing proteins, so a mutation in this gene causes a greatly increased risk of breast and ovarian cancers.

"I spent a few months processing that information and saw a couple of different surgeons. It was a really difficult time. However, I had an instant rapport with Bev. I found her to be very

compassionate, open and accessible; I instantly trusted her. So, I decided to go ahead."

Surgical oncologist and general surgeon Dr Beverley Fosh of Adelaide Plastic Surgery performed Moira's double mastectomy in August 2014. During the same surgery, plastic surgeon Dr Amy Jeeves was able to place expanders under the skin and pectoral muscle, to be enlarged very slowly over the next six months.

"In my case, because I was healthy, I recovered very quickly. I imagine it would be different if you were undergoing this procedure because of a cancer diagnosis," says Moira.

"I took three weeks off after the mastectomy and so did my partner, Andrew. After

Once the surgery was done it was like having a massive weight lifted and a lot of my concerns vanished.

four days in hospital I was home, and we started going for short walks, and then longer walks. I actually remember it as a really lovely time, I was cared for beautifully."

Moira underwent a second surgery in February 2015 to take out the expanders and insert the implants. Several other mastectomy and reconstruction methods were available, but after researching the alternatives Moira chose this particular option for the reduced recovery period.

"The most troubling time for me was between finding out I had the BRCA2 gene mutation

and having the surgery. Once the surgery was done it was like having a massive weight lifted and a lot of my concerns vanished. Before, I didn't know how much it would hurt, I didn't know what kind of impact it would have on my physicality."

Moira, who was two thirds of the way through a PhD in sociology at the time, has a love of exercise and keeping fit. The surgery has had no long-term negative impact on her physically, but she wasn't expecting how much of a positive effect it would have psychologically. "I realised how much the fear of getting breast cancer was always with me. I was able to neutralise this seemingly uncontrollable fear and worry I have had my whole life."

Moira believes she was in a fortunate position, not only to have access to the genetic testing, but also the support she received from her partner and family, and medical team, during and after the surgery process.

"I have a very supportive partner and private health cover so I was able to choose my surgeon. My situation was that I had a preventative, prophylactic mastectomy. Not having the surgery would have meant six-monthly surveillance of MRIs and ultrasound. Other people, to their credit, may be able to deal with that, but I knew it would create too much anxiety for me. The options that I had available to me were enormously beneficial. In my own way, I was able to take some form of control." 🐾

October is Australia's Breast Cancer Awareness Month. canceraustralia.gov.au