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## THE ANGELINA EFFECT

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY MATT MAXWELL

### Breast and ovarian cancers by the numbers

Specific inherited mutations in the BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes greatly increases a woman's risk of breast and ovarian cancers, according to the National Cancer Institute at the National Institute of Health. It's important to note that while the mutations make up a small percentage of breast and ovarian cancers, it sharply increases a woman's chances of developing those cancers. Here, some statistics on both cancers:

12

Percentage of women in the U.S. who will develop breast cancer sometime during their lives

1.3

Percentage of women in the U.S. who will develop ovarian cancer sometime during their lives

55 to 65

Percentage of women with the BRCA1 mutation who will develop breast cancer by age 70

39

Percentage of women with BRCA1 mutation who will develop ovarian cancer by age 70

45

Percentage of women with BRCA2 mutation who will develop breast cancer by age 70

11 to 17

Percentage of women with BRCA2 mutation who will develop ovarian cancer by age 70

A local oncologist says Jolie Pitt's preventative surgeries have raised awareness for breast and ovarian cancer genetic testing — and that's a good thing

BY PAIGE ALLEN | SUN CHRONICLE STAFF

**A**s an actress, Angelina Jolie Pitt urges moviegoers to head to the box office to catch her latest flick.

Since May 2013, she's been encouraging women to head to the doctor's office and get themselves educated about their family cancer history.

Back then, Jolie Pitt revealed in an essay for the New York Times that she had a preventative mastectomy. In another New York Times essay in late March, Jolie Pitt wrote about her second preventative surgery — ovary removal. She said she had the surgeries because of a mutation in her BRCA1 gene and her doctors estimated she had an 87 percent chance of developing breast cancer and a 50 percent chance of developing ovarian cancer. "It is not possible to remove all risk, and the

**So many people should be tested and aren't.**

— Sturdy Memorial Hospital Medical Oncologist Colleen Yavarow



fact is I remain prone to cancer," Jolie Pitt wrote. "I will look for natural ways to strengthen my immune system. I feel feminine, and grounded in the choices I am making for myself and my family. I know my children will never have to say, 'Mom died of ovarian cancer.'"

Colleen Yavarow, a medical oncologist with

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TOM MAGUIRE / THE SUN CHRONICLE

Medical oncologist Colleen Yavarow, seen here in her office at Sturdy Hematology and Oncology in Attleboro, says it's good that celebrities like Angelina Jolie Pitt speak out about genetic testing for cancer because it raises awareness in the general public. "I think celebrities have a huge influence," she said.

## EFFECT: Raising cancer awareness is a good thing

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Sturdy Hematology and Oncology Associates in Attleboro, said having celebrities like Jolie Pitt speak out is good for awareness and said she noticed an increase in patients raising questions about their family cancer history and genetic testing after Jolie Pitt made her first announcement.

"I think celebrities have a huge influence," she said. "For some reason they have this perceived expertise."

While there's much time, attention and funds dedicated to breast cancer awareness, there isn't as much about ovarian cancer, something Yavarow called a "sneaky disease" and one that often isn't found until the cancer is in the later stages.

"Most people hear ovarian cancer and they shudder," she said. "There's no good screening."

Some of the main symptoms are bloating and constipation, which Yavarow said is problematic because it's so common.

"What woman never has that?" she said.

Jolie Pitt speaking out about her increased risk of ovarian cancer and announcing her surgery — coming about a month before World Ovarian Cancer Day on May 8 — is a good way to raise awareness, something that's sorely needed, Yavarow said.

"Any awareness about ovarian cancer is good," she said.

### Testing not limited to the wealthy

Getting tested for the BRCA1 and BRCA2 gene mutations — as well as testing on a range of other genes — isn't limited to someone of Jolie Pitt's wealth and status.

A simple blood test can be done — Yavarow estimates she does approximately 10 a week — and the results, which encompass about 25 different genes, take about a month to process. Before testing, Yavarow does genetic counseling to talk about whether the person wants to go through with the testing — often the answer is yes — and then discusses what the next steps would be after receiving the results.

Yavarow said it's typically not an issue getting insurance companies to pay for the genetic testing — which

### 'Saving lives is what it does. It saves lives.'

Dr. Colleen Yavarow on genetic testing to find gene mutations

### Know more

Yavarow will speak about cancer and genetic testing at a seminar at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday in the auditorium at Sturdy Memorial Hospital in Attleboro. Call 508-236-7015 to register.

costs approximately \$6,000 — as long as the patient meets certain criteria, such as having a family history of breast or ovarian cancer or having other certain cancers.

Specific inherited mutations in the BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes greatly increases a woman's risk of breast and ovarian cancers, according to the National Cancer Institute at the National Institute of Health.

Combined, mutations in the BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes account for between 20 and 25 percent of hereditary breast cancers and between five and 10 percent of all breast cancers in the U.S. Mutations in the genes account for approximately 15 percent of all ovarian cancers.

While the mutations make up a small percentage of breast and ovarian cancers, it sharply increases a woman's chances of developing those cancers.

Approximately 12 percent of American women will develop breast cancer sometime during their lives. However, between 55 and 65 percent of women with the BRCA1 mutation and approximately 45 percent of women with the BRCA2 mutation will develop breast cancer by age 70.

Only about 1.3 percent of American women will develop ovarian cancer at some point during their lives, but about 39 percent of women with the BRCA1 mutation and between 11 and 17 percent of women with the BRCA2 mutation will develop ovarian cancer by age 70.

Anyone with a family history of ovarian cancer should be tested, Yavarow said. The mutation is hereditary, so even if the patient already has a cancer diagnosis, family mem-

bers can be tested and potentially be warned ahead of time of an increased risk of certain cancers. Children of people with the mutation have a 50 percent chance of inheriting it and it can be passed on from the father or mother, Yavarow said.

"Some people have to learn (the news) the hard way," she said. "It's much easier to face the results when it's not a cancer diagnosis."

If a patient tests positive for the BRCA1 or BRCA2 mutations, their parents, siblings, children, cousins and other family members should all be tested as well, including men, Yavarow said.

In the general population, a man has less than a one percent chance of developing breast cancer, Yavarow said. With the mutation, he has between an eight and 10 percent chance. Additionally, they're at greater risk to develop prostate cancer and melanoma, she said.

"So many people should be tested and aren't," she said.

While Jolie Pitt elected to have preventive surgery — decreasing her risk of developing breast cancer from more than 80 percent to less than five percent — not everyone needs to take that step, Yavarow said.

"It's a very acceptable thing if patients don't want surgery to do MRI and mammography," she said.

The different imaging is alternated with patient screening every six months so that should any tumors begin to grow, they can be caught in the early stages.

At a seminar open to the public at Sturdy Memorial Hospital at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday, Yavarow will speak about cancer and genetic testing. She'll touch on what genes do and why some people are more prone than others, as well as discuss different environmental factors.

Educating people on different genetic tests they qualify for is important because it allows for the testing and action ahead of a possible cancer diagnosis.

"Saving lives is what it does," she said. "It saves lives."

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