

# 'I HOPE I NEVER HAVE "THAT CONVERSATION" WITH MY DAUGHTER'

When Emma Parlons (right), 41, discovered she carried the BRCA gene, she didn't hesitate about having a double mastectomy and ovary removal. Now, the prospect of having 'that conversation' with her daughter is something that fills her with dread...

AS TOLD TO MIRANDA LEVY  
PHOTOS: RICK PUSHINSKY

**'DURING THE LAST** school half-term, I was on the Tube with my eight-year-old daughter. "Mummy," Sophie piped in her high, clear voice. "What's breast cancer?" Half the carriage stopped in their tracks and looked round. "Is that what you had?"

'As it happens, I didn't have breast cancer. But around five years ago, I discovered that I was a carrier of the BRCA gene. It's what Angelina Jolie has – a genetic mutation that gives you an 85 per cent lifetime chance of contracting breast cancer and a 40 per cent chance of ovarian cancer. Like Angelina, I went through a double mastectomy – and I also opted for ovary removal – to save my own life.

'Rewind three years more. My 45-year-

old cousin on my father's side discovered she had breast cancer. The obligatory medical history check revealed that three of my paternal aunts had also had the disease. Dad decided to be tested for the gene, to save me the agony if his result had come back negative. I didn't want to know the result. Still, the call came through when I was on holiday. Dad had tested positive, which meant it was 50/50 that I would, too. Sick to my stomach, I went to be tested as soon as we returned.

"Do you really want to know this?" asked the doctor who would carry out the genetic test. The knowledge would be a heavy burden. Not finding out would mean a life of not-so-blissful ignorance, but ▶

discovering the truth would mean I had to act, or be severely negligent about my own health. "No way," I said, standing up to leave the office. But my mother persuaded me back in and I did the test.

'It took three weeks to get the result. In that time, I did the only thing I know how to do – I sprang into action. I spoke and cried to all my friends. Hugged my darling husband and children; tried to remove the anguish from my guilt-stricken father's face. While I was doing the normal routine of school runs, partying and even watching movies, a voice was playing in my head: was I living my life just waiting to get cancer?

'I was at home when my mobile went. My memory is of staring out of the window when the gene doctor said, "Please make an immediate appointment." "No," I said, feeling physically ill. "Tell me now." And that's when he said it. "I'm afraid you are a carrier."

'From that moment, I had no hesitation. A friend put it this way: if someone told you that you were getting on a plane, and the plane had an 85 per cent chance of crashing, would you take it? Of course you wouldn't. The radical but most effective solution would be a double mastectomy and ovary removal. There was another, less fundamental option – to suffer terrifying six-monthly scans for the rest of my life and take a toxic medication that might reduce my risk to 40 per cent.

'But it wasn't enough. "Take away my breasts," I told the doctors. "But not my life." My strong, amazing mother agreed. "You have young children, a husband," she said. "You have no choice." I knew that my daughter had a 50/50 chance of also having the gene, but I pushed that thought to the back of my mind. First of all, I needed to save myself.

'My indomitable mother and I saw many surgeons. The lowest point was after visiting a doctor who said I'd lose muscle on my back and my thigh, and probably never play tennis or swim ever again. But then I met Mr Gui at The Royal Marsden. His pencils were all in a neat line and I thought: "This is the man for me." I no longer wanted to have a time bomb strapped to my chest. "Get these off," I told him. Looking back, I'm amazed at how empowered I felt.

'Just before I went for my double mastectomy, in January 2009, I sat in

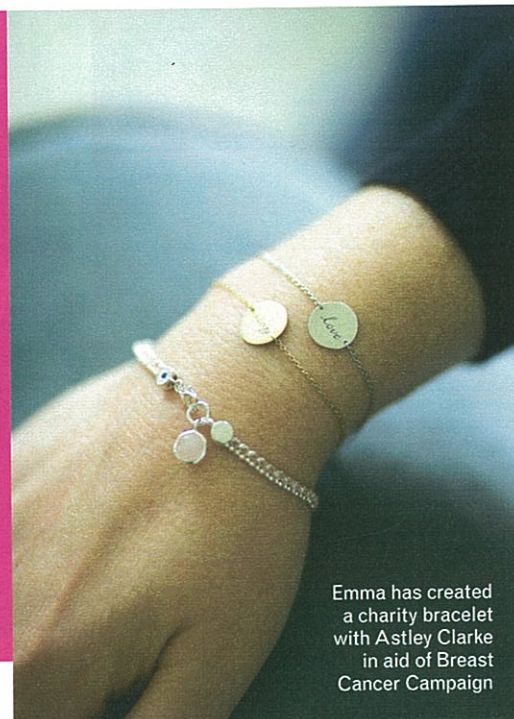
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bed with my daughter. We were reading a book, *Topsy And Tim Go To Hospital*. "Hospital is a good place that makes you better," I said. "But Mummy is not sick. Mummy is going to have an operation to stop her getting sick." Amazingly, Sophie accepted this and when she came to visit me after my double mastectomy, she sang out, "Well, get up and walk then."

'When I woke up from the operation and reconstruction, I was given the news that no cancer cells had been found – my greatest fear. I felt euphoric. There was no pain, it just felt like someone sitting on my chest. The morning after the surgery, I woke up to find my husband Jeremy in tears on the rocking chair by my bed. "You've just saved your life," he said.

'The removal of my ovaries a year later was a simple procedure (though going through the symptoms of menopause at 39 was not something that thrilled me). I admit I was lucky: I had already had my



Emma has created a charity bracelet with Astley Clarke in aid of Breast Cancer Campaign

children. I shudder to think how I'd have felt if I had received this news at 21.

'From the moment my surgeries were over, I felt entirely at peace. I felt "fixed". My life risk of getting cancer is now only four per cent and I am living life to the full, every moment.

'Happy in the knowledge of my own health, I couldn't help but turn my attention to Sophie. I was helping her little child's body out of the bath one day when I thought, "She's going to have breasts one day. She will be in danger."

'Though it's hardly my fault (just as it was never my father's), the guilt can be overwhelming. But Sophie is just nine years old. She can't be tested before she's 18. I can't bear the thought of her finding out the news before she too has a wonderful husband and children. One day, I will have to have "the conversation" with her. But as my fantastic surgeon Mr Gui pointed out, science is moving so fast that there may be a pill to fix BRCA before we even get that far.

'That day on the Tube, I reminded Sophie that I'd had my operations so I wouldn't get sick. "Mummy," she said, "I love you. You are so, so clever." But I'm not the clever one here. I'm the one who simply wants to make sure my daughter and her generation have more options, more knowledge and less breast cancer. And the best thing I can do for my daughter, as for my husband, my son and myself, is to live life to the full, every single day.' ■

Emma Parlons is raising funds for Breast Cancer Campaign with jewellery designer Astley Clarke. For more details about their stunning bracelet, visit [astleyclarke.com](http://astleyclarke.com)