

Three women in Elisha Neave's family have died from cancer, her mother and sisters have had breasts removed. Now she must make a heart-wrenching decision

# Gene makes breast cancer a family curse

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The Neave sisters know all about the devastating effects of breast cancer: it killed their great-grandmother, great-aunt and grandmother before the age of 50.

Their mother has battled the disease twice and had a breast removed and sisters Veronica Neave, 41, and Christine Keenpence, 43, had double mastectomies to avoid the cancer which plagues their family.

Now youngest sister Elisha Neave, 31, faces the heart wrenching decision to have her breasts removed. The Perth mother-of-one found a lump last month and had an anxious one-month wait for test results.

Doctors confirmed it was not cancerous but it reminded Elisha that the radical surgery would reduce her cancer risk from 85 per cent to just 5 per cent.

"I'm dreading going through with it," she said.

"I know the journey is really hard. It plays with your head and it's so emotional and draining but I know I will.

"I don't know when, I don't want to think about it yet, but I do know there is a light at the end of the tunnel."

The Neave women carry the

Breast Cancer Type 2 susceptibility protein, known as the BRCA2 gene, a genetic mutation which makes them 85 per cent likely to get breast cancer.

The sisters' great-grandmother Maude Hutchins, great-aunt Dolly Gleeson and grandmother Elsie Clitherow died from breast cancer before they turned 50 and their aunt Margaret Boles developed it at 59.

Even before tests confirmed the sisters carried the gene, they knew the risk for them was high.

"My mother always talked to us of death so we would not be afraid," Veronica Neave said. "She knew the history of cancer in our family was more than coincidence. Needless to say, while growing up there was a shadow of awareness that breast cancer was in my genes."

Their mother Claudette Neave, who has had two primary breast cancers and a breast removed, was the first to be confirmed with BRCA2. All three daughters were then tested and found to carry it.

Veronica, who wrote the book *Pieces of Me — Surviving the Breast Cancer I May Never Have*, said discovering she carried the gene was more difficult

because of the limited treatment options. "It's a bizarre predicament, dealing with the concept that it's highly probable you'll get cancer and making decisions on a future that may not happen but could kill you," she said.

"It puts you in a precarious situation."

Although doctors could identify the gene, research had not caught up so there were not many ways to deal with the news.

The options were limited — a lifetime of testing and medication or removing healthy breasts.

Soon after the gene test, Christine took the bold step to have her breasts removed and undergo reconstruction. Veronica took about a year to decide to do the same and Elisha plans to have the surgery but cannot say when.

In the meantime, she sees her GP regularly and has blood tests, mammograms and ultrasounds every few months.

Despite being daunted, Elisha stays positive and knows she will have the double mastectomy, whether it's in a month, a year or five years. "It's really the best option and when the time comes, I'm sure I'll cope," she said.

- One in eight women in Australia will be diagnosed with the cancer
- There are nearly 12,000 new cases and 2600 deaths a year
- Fifteen per cent of all breast cancers are advanced at diagnosis
- Women whose cancer is diagnosed when it is contained in the breast have a 90% chance of surviving five years compared with 20% when the cancer has spread



Family misfortune: The Neave women — Veronica, left, Christine, Claudette and Elisha all carry the BRCA2 breast cancer gene which gives them an 85 per cent chance of getting breast cancer

**Victim: Elisha's grandmother, Elsie Clitherow**

