

A Beautiful life

Miss America contestant Allyn Rose lost her mom to breast cancer as a teen.

Today, she's made a controversial decision that she hopes will help her avoid the same fate.

BY GINA ROBERTS-GREY

At January's Miss America pageant, Allyn Rose, Miss District of Columbia, showed off her figure in a bikini and evening gown and raced around the stage in roller skates. Now, the healthy 24-year-old model and paralegal is getting ready to have a double mastectomy—a procedure few young women could imagine having. “[The thought of] losing my breasts isn’t nearly as scary as the thought of losing my life,” she says.

Allyn wasn’t yet born when her mom, Judy, was diagnosed with breast cancer at 27. Judy had a mastectomy, then married and had Allyn and her younger brother. Judy’s cancer returned in her remaining breast two decades later, and she succumbed to the disease at 48, when Allyn was just 16. “She missed so much in my life,” says Allyn.

Judy left her children letters that touched Allyn deeply—and led to an important decision. “In her last letter she said, *Ally, you’re my star and I’m so sorry to leave you. I know you’ll need me for many years*,” says Allyn.

“That line resonates with me because as I’ve gotten older, I can put myself in her position and imagine her fear of not wanting to leave the job of raising her kids unfinished.

“My mother had to put everything



“I treat my body like a temple”

Allyn is committed to a healthy lifestyle. Her best advice:

- **Get a handle on your family history.** Knowing what illnesses you’re predisposed to can help you make smart decisions about screenings.
- **Never skip a mammogram.** “My mom [Judy] thought she had outlived cancer, so she skipped three years of mammograms,” says Allyn. “[Her cancer] might have been caught sooner if she had kept up with the tests.”
- **Be good to your body.** “I treat my body like a temple,” she says. “I try to eat a plant-based diet and seek out foods linked to a lower risk of cancer.”

she wanted to tell her kids about learning to drive and picking a college or a mate in a few letters, and I don’t want to be in that position. I don’t want my kids to have to find that letter some day.”

A brave choice

Allyn was tested for both breast cancer genes, but like her mom she’s not a carrier. She is, however, a carrier of the genetic mutation that causes Wiskott-Aldrich syndrome, a condition in which patients bruise and bleed easily and have an increased risk of infection and some cancers. Judy and several other women in Allyn’s family were also carriers. Although the syndrome hasn’t proven to be linked with breast cancer, it can’t

be ruled out. “My mom’s oncologists said there probably is a link,” says Allyn, whose grandmother and great aunt also died from breast cancer. “Decreasing my risk as much as possible makes sense for me.”

Now that she’s just three years younger than her mom was when she was diagnosed, Allyn realizes that being alive is more important than having a perfect body. “My mom would have given up every part of her body to be here for me, to watch me in the pageant,” she has said. “If there’s something I can do to be proactive, [I’ll do it]. It might hurt my body and it might hurt my physical beauty, but I’m going to be alive.”

Allyn is hardly alone in her choice: The number of women opting for

preventive mastectomies increased tenfold between 1998 and 2007, since genetic testing and reconstructive surgery options have improved, according to a study published in the *Annals of Surgical Oncology*.

Although Allyn has been criticized by people who accuse her of harming her healthy body, she stands by her decision. And she has plenty of supporters. “A woman I saw at the gym told me I was absolutely making the right decision and that it helped save her life,” she wrote in a Facebook post. “I left feeling so amazing.”

Pushing for prevention

Not surprisingly, Allyn has become an outspoken breast cancer advocate. She chose breast cancer prevention as her platform in the Miss America pageant. She’s also partnered with the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation, the Tigerlily Foundation and Dig Pink to educate young people about cancer prevention. In March, she received the Women’s Health Advocacy Award at the 21st Annual Congress on Women’s Health in Washington, D.C.

Allyn’s choice is likely to have a far-reaching impact. “I want women to know that breasts don’t define your womanhood,” says Allyn, who plans to have reconstructive surgery. “My mom had one breast, and she was the most beautiful woman I knew.”

Who should consider a preventive mastectomy?

A preventive mastectomy may reduce your breast cancer risk, but it’s not for everyone. “Discuss your family history with an expert in the genetics of breast cancer,” advises Steven Come, MD, director of breast medical oncology at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston. Here, the factors that may make you a candidate for surgery, according to the National Cancer Institute:

- **A history of breast cancer.** If you’ve had cancer in one breast, you’re more likely to develop it in the other one.
- **Family history.** You’re at increased risk if your mother, sister or daughter has had the disease—especially before age 50.
- **You have a genetic mutation.** If you test positive for the genes linked to breast cancer, you’re at increased risk.
- **You have a lobular carcinoma in situ.** This condition, in which you have abnormal cells in the milk ducts, boosts your risk of developing cancer.
- **You’ve had chest radiation,** which can increase your risk of breast cancer.