



Actress Fran Drescher is so determined to spare women the agony of a cancer diagnosis that she's started her own advocacy group and lobbies Congress for new laws. Here, the story of her journey from cancer patient to health activist.

BY GINA ROBERTS-GREY

“I live
to
talk
about
cancer”



Fran Drescher, star of TV Land's *Happily Divorced*, may be known for her New York accent and witty humor, but she wants to be remembered for something else: her advocacy for women's health. Last year, the 55-year-old actress traveled to Washington, DC, to lobby Congress for the Carcinogen-Free Label Act of 2012, a bill that would allow qualifying consumer products to be labeled as carcinogen-free.

It's not the first time she's tried to make a difference in public health. In May 2005, Fran testified at a hearing on gynecological disorders and helped pass the Gynecologic Cancer Education and Awareness Act. The legislation mandates a national campaign—complete with written materials and public service announcements—to boost awareness of gynecological cancers. "It's gratifying to know a person can speak at a Senate hearing and actually make a change," says Fran, who is best known for producing and starring in the CBS hit comedy *The Nanny*.

In 2008, the U.S. Department of State appointed Fran to the position of Public Diplomacy Envoy for Women's Health Issues. "I speak with our allied nations and military on health care and taking control of your body," explains the actress, who has traveled to Romania, Hungary, Kosovo, Poland and other countries to promote awareness and early detection of women's cancers.

Fran's passion for helping others take charge of their health stems from her own medical crisis. About 15 years ago, she began experiencing worrisome gynecologic symptoms and saw eight different

doctors to pinpoint the cause. "The doctors were saying I was experiencing an early menopause," she recalls. "I went on several different hormone replacement therapies." Ultimately, she was diagnosed with Stage I uterine cancer. "I was watching TV when the doctor called [to tell me]," says Fran. "I literally dropped to my knees and wept."

Fran had a hysterectomy (surgery to remove her uterus), which led to a clean bill of health. She didn't require any additional treatment and has been cancer-free for about 13 years. "I got famous, then I got cancer, and now I live to talk about it," says Fran. "Sometimes the best gifts come in the ugliest packages."

A mission to empower women

In 2002, Fran wrote a book, *Cancer Schmancer*, to share her experience and raise awareness of the importance of early detection. While on her book tour, she realized other women had had experiences similar to her own. "I realized the book was the beginning of a life mission to improve women's healthcare in America," she says. So in 2007, she launched the nonprofit Cancer Schmancer organization to promote the importance of prevention and early detection of cancer. "We need to take control of our bodies and become greater partners with our physicians," says Fran. "We want to empower ourselves—and the women we love—to become medical consumers. [We need] to listen to our bodies, ask the right questions and seek second opinions."

Cancer Schmancer sends more than a dozen "Fran Vans" to low-income neighborhoods in Los Angeles and New

York. The vans, which advertise the importance of early detection, offer free mammograms to uninsured women 40 and older. The organization also encourages people to hold “Trash Cancer” parties in their homes. Guests are encouraged to purge their homes of harmful cleaning, food and beauty products. “The best cure for cancer is to not

get it in the first place,” Fran has said. “We want to prevent cancer by eliminating the causes.”

Fran recently introduced an initiative in California to mandate women’s cancer screenings at their routine exams. And today, she’s considering a run for the U.S. Senate. “I was encouraged by both sides of the party line,” she says. “It’s

something I see on the horizon.” In the meantime, she’s committed to helping other women stay healthy. Her best advice for fellow cancer survivors? “Become something better than you were before, whether it is how you relate to your family or how compassionate you are as a human being. Turning pain into purpose is healing.”

3 ways to create a healthy home

“We have control over what we bring into our home,” says Fran. She advises taking the following steps to reduce your cancer risk:



1 Focus on fresh foods

Canned foods may pose a health risk. A recent study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that people who consumed one serving of canned food daily over the course of five days had significantly elevated levels of bisphenol-A, or BPA, a chemical that lines most food and drink cans. BPA, which is also found in plastic bottles, can mimic the body’s hormones and has been linked to a higher risk of cancer.

2 Go natural

Limit your exposure to toxic ingredients in cleaning products by making your own cleaning supplies. Consider using baking soda for deodorizing and scouring bathroom tile, olive oil for polishing wood, and a combination of vinegar or lemon juice and water for disinfecting kitchens or bathrooms. When you do use cleaning products, keep the area well ventilated by opening windows and doors. Avoid using products with unhealthy ingredients. Check out the American Cancer Society’s list of cancer-causing chemicals at cancer.org/cancer/cancercauses/othercarcinogens/generalinformationaboutcarcinogens/known-and-probable-human-carcinogens.



3 Know what’s in your cosmetics

Check out Skin Deep (ewg.org/skindeep), a cosmetics database from the Environmental Working Group (an environmental health research and advocacy group). It enables you to look up products and determine whether they contain ingredients associated with cancer. Another good source of information is cosmeticsinfo.org, which provides information about cosmetics safety.