

## Having Kids after Cancer

By: Amy A. Dubitsky

Eve Kobell, a beautiful little girl, is often called a miracle baby. Her mother, Deena, is a breast cancer survivor who had doubted that she would be able to know the joys of parenthood. When a woman receives a cancer diagnosis, she may be in shock and overwhelmed by the amount of information she must absorb in order to make decisions about the course of her care. And when a young woman is diagnosed, she may also be concerned about damaging side effects her treatment may have on her fertility. According to Shera Dubitsky, a psychologist and clinical supervisor at Sharsheret, "Women can to be their own advocates. There was a time in the history of breast cancer where the only goal was to save the person's life. Now, the goal includes lifesaving treatment and opportunities for women to explore fertility interventions."

Sharsheret, a support organization for young Jewish women facing breast cancer, has been working with doctors to be more sensitive to the cultural needs of young Jewish women. "Doctors sometimes assume that because a woman already has a few children, fertility won't be a concern," says Dubitsky. "But even for these women, who embrace the Jewish value of procreating and having large families, infertility can be devastating." According to a study referred to on [breastcancer.org](http://breastcancer.org), done by the H. Lee Moffitt Cancer Center and Research Institute in Miami, while 70% of oncologists discuss infertility with their patients, less than 25% referred patients to a fertility specialist and less than 25% distributed educational materials on fertility to their patients. Dubitsky asserts that, "genetic testing and edu-

cation about fertility preservation, should be part of the standard level of care. A patient should be able to choose to harvest her eggs, preserve ovarian tissue, or do nothing at all if she so chooses."

Dubitsky's mention of genetic testing refers to the BRCA1 gene mutation, often found in Ashkenazi Jews with breast cancer. In fact, many of the calls received by Sharsheret are young women who have not yet been diagnosed with breast cancer. "You can have a 40 year old cancer survivor who tested positive for the BRCA 1 gene, that has an 18 year old daughter who is now worried about her own future and fertility," says Elana Silber, Director of Operations at Sharsheret. The link program, which according to Sharsheret's website is "a peer support network connecting women newly diagnosed or at high risk of develop-



Deena Kobell with her daughter, Eve

ing breast cancer with others who share similar diagnoses and experiences," helps these women by providing a source of information and support from someone who shares a similar background and values.

Deena Kobell, who now participates in helping others as a "link," was 29 years old when she was diagnosed with stage 2 breast cancer. "I informed my medical team that I hoped to have children someday, but there was no time for any fertility preservation," says Kobell. "I had to roll the proverbial dice where my fertility was concerned." Three years after completing treatment, and still cancer-free, Kobell was given the green light to get pregnant. Since her doctors recommended a prophylactic oophorectomy by age thirty-five, time was of the essence. After a year of trying unsuccessfully to become pregnant, Kobell turned to in-vitro fertilization. After successful fertilization of 15 embryos, Kobell decided that since she had suffered from hereditary breast cancer, she didn't want to pass that gene on to her child and found a geneticist that was able to test the embryos for the BRCA 1 gene. "The geneticist explained that this was akin to looking through 3,000 sets of Encyclopedias to find one missing letter," says Kobell. Four unaffected embryos were identified and the most viable ones were implanted in Kobell. "Nine days later, I received the wonderful news that I was pregnant." In December 2006, little Eve Helena was born and named for Deena's mother, who had suffered from ovarian cancer.

Deena had been able to fulfill her dream of parenthood while simultaneously doing all she could to preserve the life and future fertility of her daughter. Deena has made every attempt in her power to break the chain of cancer suffered by the women in her family and became a "Link" for Sharsheret, helping Jewish women around the world cope with breast cancer and fertility issues.

Amy Dubitsky is a freelance writer and a member of Sharsheret's National Advisory Board. For more information, please visit [www.Sharsheret.org](http://www.Sharsheret.org) or call 866-474-2774.

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