
The Mammography Diaries™



a journey through a woman's mammogram...

The Mammography Diaries



It's something most of us would rather not think about, but that really doesn't help. Denial seldom does. And periodically, there's a chilling wake-up call that hits close to home. A close friend, a sister, a mother is diagnosed with breast cancer and life for all involved changes in an instant.

We all know what we're supposed to do, that annual mammogram every year, every year, every year. But is it really necessary? And who's watching? And is somebody going to turn me in to the mammo police if I skip an exam?

Such self-deception can have deadly consequences. In 2010, The American Cancer Society stated there were roughly 40,000 fatalities linked to breast cancer and an estimated 200,000 new cases were diagnosed. About one woman in eight will develop breast cancer over the course of a lifetime. With the diagnosis comes treatments and procedures designed to save lives and reduce suffering, but there is yet no cure and no simple remedy for those afflicted.

Torn between the fear of breast cancer and the anxiety from the stress associated with the exam that detects it, many women repeatedly postpone their mammogram and try not to worry about the consequences. To help resolve this conflict that so many women experience, Beekley Medical has initiated a research project called The Mammography Diaries.

Most women are not aware that the earliest form of breast cancer can be a "micro-calcification" which is usually smaller than a pinhead. While such calcifications cannot be felt with a self breast exam, they can be detected on a mammogram. If a malignant calcification is discovered in the breast it can feel devastating to the patient, but it is not necessarily tragic. According to the American Cancer Society, if a cancer is caught when it is equal to or less than 2cm the 5-year relative survival rate is 95%. The difference in the timing of the diagnosis is often directly impacted by the frequency with which a woman makes and keeps her mammography appointments. The timing of the diagnosis can be as important as the diagnosis itself.

So far, 179 women have contributed their diaries to this project. Synopses of six of these diaries are shown. They represent a good cross-section of the experiences reported in the diaries collected so far.

Diary #1

It's Uncomfortable. It's painful. The machine is cold. It's really no fun at all, but I know it's important.

I am 48 years old. My life has had two parts: the one before I was diagnosed and the one since. I had my first mammogram when I was 36 and was diagnosed with breast cancer when I was 40. With the help of treatment it has now been in remission for almost 10 years.

With that history you'd think I'd be more conscientious about getting my annual mammograms, but I'm not. I always dread going. The experience is unpleasant and painful. Holding myself in an awkward position so the technologist can get a good image is a killer and that machine is always so darn cold. And I am always so anxious.

The whole deal is just lousy, but what choice do you have but to continue on? I have a family that worries about me.

Diary #2

A painful, prolonged exam. 9 takes, 9 exposures to radiation. Will not go again for 5 years. Is it even necessary?

I am 43 years old and have been getting mammograms since my early thirties. Once I had a breast biopsy done because of a suspicious area on my mammogram, but everything turned out OK. The result was negative. All in all, my experiences weren't too bad.

That all has changed. My last mammogram was a disaster. The technologist was rough and incompetent. She took 9 different readings; said I had dense breasts.

After 9 takes I told her to stop because I was afraid I was getting too much radiation.

I don't think I'll get another mammogram for 5 years. I saw on the TV show 20/20 that much of this is unnecessary and many women have gotten cancer as a result of too many mammograms. I have no family history and I live healthy. I'm not going to put myself through this again soon.

Diary #3

Diagnosed with DCIS*. Subsequent mistaken call-back! High stress! Pleased with treatment at a breast center.

Since being diagnosed with DCIS at a 'routine mammography office' I insist on receiving care at a breast imaging center. With this change in where I get my mammograms, my experiences have gone from horrible to very good.

At my old mammography place I got a 'call-back' request after my DCIS diagnosis. I was immediately stressed. And then, my follow-up appointment could not be scheduled for quite a while. After I arrived for that appointment, I overheard one of the staff say "this was not supposed to be a call-back, the report just says to compare the results with the previous year". Their mistake caused me great personal suffering.

I have recently switched health plans and providers, but I go out of my way to receive care at a breast imaging center. The staff and facility there are wonderful; digital imaging is available and same day results are given to me. This is very important to me

I am now in my fifties; I didn't have my first mammogram until I was 48. It is probably a good idea for women to start getting mammograms every two years when they're in their early forties.

*Ductal carcinoma in situ

Diary #4

Good Mammography Experiences. One Biopsy Scare. Will Continue Annual Mammograms!

I have never had an unpleasant experience when getting my mammograms and I have had these screenings at different locations in different states. So I'd say my experiences with mammograms has been pretty good.

However, one year the mammogram indicated an area of concern to the doctor and this resulted in my getting a breast biopsy.

Thankfully the biopsy proved negative and I have had no other such scares or problems since.

I am now 56 years old and continue to go faithfully for my mammogram every year. I feel strongly that women should start getting their mammograms early, maybe 35 to 40, and then go back annually for the next one. I get my mammograms at a nearby hospital for the convenience. It has worked out well for me.

Diary #5

***Tested positive. Anxious about a recurrence.
Comfortable with breast imaging center.***

I have had a breast biopsy which tested positive for cancer. Since then I always dread going for my mammogram because of the anxiety I feel worrying about a possible breast cancer recurrence.

I am 42 years old and had my first mammogram when I was 32. It had been about a year since my last mammogram; I go back pretty regularly each year.

When I arrived for my mammogram screening I was greeted pleasantly by the receptionist and although my

wait was less than 10 minutes, I still had anxious feelings. My technologist was talkative throughout the exam and I appreciated that. I was also glad to get my results as quickly as I did!

I got my mammogram at a breast imaging center associated with my OB/GYN. I would recommend this imaging center to others because I have had good experiences there and they offer other testing services like ultrasound.

Diary #6

One scare was enough. I find it awfully hard to face up to the anxiety my annual mammogram brings, but I go because I have to.

I am now 61 years old and have been getting annual mammograms for 20 years. About 10 years ago I was called back for a second mammogram to be done. This led to me having a breast biopsy which turned out to be a benign fibroadenoma. So it worked out OK, but it was a very frightening experience for me.

The imaging center I go to is very good, the people are all very professional and friendly. I get the results of my mammograms very quickly, same day usually.

Nevertheless, I find it very hard to relax as the day I'm getting my next mammogram nears.

When I went for my last mammogram, I didn't have to wait very long before I was called to get prepared for the exam, but in those few minutes I felt my heart start to race and in spite of my best efforts to remain calm I just couldn't keep from obsessing about a possible bad outcome. Thankfully, that didn't happen and I'm set for another year.

There are a number of useful lessons to be learned from these diaries:

1. **Plan ahead.** Make next year's appointment before you leave the facility after this year's exam and keep it!
2. **Take the scary out of the exam.** Don't be afraid to ask the technologist what she is doing as she goes through the steps of your mammogram.
3. **Chill out.** Try to arrive at the exam relaxed. Focus on a special treat you have planned for yourself after the exam... a new blouse, an ice cream or a manicure.
4. **Think positively and hope for the very best.** While you can't dictate the diagnosis, the high survival rate for breast cancer is a proven fact.
5. **Go for it.** Make the commitment. Get that mammogram every year.

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