



# The Mammography Diaries

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.



179 women contributed their diaries to this project and the six shown are a good cross-section of those reported. They are followed by 10 candid recollections voicing women's mammography experiences and the implications of each for breast imaging centers.

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## 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.

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## 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.

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## 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.

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## 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.

# 10 Voices from The Mammography Suite:

1. *I can be very tense when I arrive for my mammogram. A pleasant greeting from a competent receptionist will help me begin to relax.*

**The first few minutes of a woman's mammography appointment can be critical.** The mammography experience begins when the patient walks in the door. It's the kind of greeting they get from the receptionist. It's about how long they wait until called in for their exam.

2. *Given my personal history, I'm expecting that the technologist is well acquainted with my file, my past exam results. But this is not always the case.*

**The only case history that's important to the patient is their own.** Every patient comes to the mammogram with a unique personal history. For some, every detail of that history is vivid and its significance is overstated. They often assume their technologists share this perspective.

3. *Some technologists are totally focused on conducting the exam and don't say a word. It reminds me of the seriousness of the exam and the bad outcomes that might result. The silence gets me wondering... what does she see that she doesn't want to talk about.*

**Pleasant conversation is one of the best tools to relax patients.** They are reassured by any interest the technologist shows in them personally, whether it be talking through the steps of the exam or chatting about some topic currently in the news.

4. *Sometimes I feel the technologist just going through the motions, so much so that she hardly notices I'm there. I guess she's on some kind of schedule...and I'm just another patient to get in and get out. I don't like the way that feels.*

**Patients feel they should get the undivided attention of the technologist.** Although imaging centers are under pressure to maximize throughput, this requirement should never become apparent to the patient.

5. *The last mammogram I had was right after I left work, at about 4:30. There was a bit of traffic on the way, so I felt rushed and I was tired after a hard day. When I arrived at the radiology center the receptionist and the technologist looked as burned out as I felt. Not very reassuring!*

**Extended hours are only a plus if people on duty at the end of their shift still look energized.** The technologist's day can be long and exhausting, but the last patient of the day will require as much care and attention as the one whose mammogram was at 8:00 AM.

# 10 Voices from The Mammography Suite:

6. *I usually show up for my mammograms tight and tense. One technologist that did my mammogram about two years ago had such a cheerful and infectious personality that I found myself chatting with her in no time at all. It really made a huge difference in my outlook.*

**An upbeat attitude is contagious and can instill hope and calm.** A very large percent of women arrive for their mammogram in a very tense state of mind. Anything that helps them to relax is very much appreciated.

7. *I had a great experience the last time I went to the hospital for my mammogram. The staff was so considerate and the room I waited in for my exam was so pleasant I was actually beginning to feel good about it! I'm thinking I should schedule my family's exams at this hospital when possible.*

**A satisfied customer can produce new business almost immediately.** Most women make the decisions for a family's health care. This has very important implications for facilities offering multiple services.

8. *My last mammogram was my best ever. I picked the center knowing it had digital, but when I got there (wow!) the waiting room had a fireplace and flavored tea similar to a spa so I felt relaxed! I just had to share it with my friends. I knew they would want the same experience.*

**Friends tell friends about experiences with doctors and other professionals.** When it's positive it is a powerful referral, when negative it could mean lost business. Facilities typically see their patients once a year. And since most don't advertise, it is essential to make a positive impression when a woman comes in for her mammogram.

9. *The imaging center I go to for my mammogram is run very professionally, but I can't help notice the worn furniture and the old magazines.*

**Imagine you're a first time patient coming into your facility. Would you be impressed? Indifferent? Turned off?** Cutting costs may appear to be a good way to increase profitability, but not if they result in lost customers. Some small things can make a big impression, positive or negative...a cloth robe that offers comfort or a worn carpet that suggests neglect.

10. *The breast care facility I now go to for my mammogram is very good at telling me the results of my exam, the same day usually. This is a comfort; not to be left hanging, wondering.*

**In the world of mammography fast reporting of results is very important and very much appreciated.** All patients have grown accustomed to very fast turnarounds in all aspects of their daily lives. They expect no less when it comes to something as important as their annual mammogram.