

Catherine McCutcheon

Here's a broad but I think very safe statement to make: Most women dread their annual mammograms. We do it because we know we should...and we despise every second of it. Whose idea was it anyway to take one of our most sensitive body parts and squish it between two plates of glass while the rest of our body is contorted into an awkward position, literally draped over a machine. Foreplay it's not!

It doesn't matter whether you're well endowed or fried-egg flat, mammograms are clumsy, uncomfortable and yes, they can be painful. In fact most of us would sooner have our legs in stirrups for our yearly check up than the breast vice grip.

Physicians recommend a mammogram each year after the age of fifty and for those of us with a family history of breast cancer, even earlier. So why do we subject ourselves to this year after year? It's simple – the “C” word is one every man and woman fears. It seems now more than ever cancer affects someone we know and love, if not ourselves. We've been told early detection of breast cancer is critical to our recovery.

Earlier this month I was asked to co-emcee, The Breast Show in Town, with Wendy Spence owner of The Healthy Lifestyle Store in Dorchester. I have to tell you it was a life-changing event for both Wendy and me. Eye opening is more like it. One thing we aren't told as we prepare for our mammography results is that if cancer has been detected early, it means you already have it. Cancer starts with one abnormal cell and it takes nearly 8 years for one cell to replicate to one billion cells. Keep in mind too that no dose of radiation is harmless; exposure is known to be cumulative, so women, who undergo a mammogram once a year, increase their risk accordingly.

Thanks to the Breast Show in Town, Wendy and I were given the opportunity to experience another alternative to the mammogram-thermography. As Wendy and I learned from Patricia Kennedy of Thermography Clinic in London, Breast Thermography - also known as Digital Infrared Imaging - has come to the forefront of new screening technologies. For a patient the process is painless and non invasive. I first filled out a breast health questionnaire and health history. I was asked to remove my blouse and bra and then sat behind a curtain for 15 minutes until my body had adjusted to the room temperature. The female technician took images and then placed my hands in cold water for sixty seconds to put my body into “fright or flight” response. Normal blood cells contract and cool down while blood cells feeding abnormal cells will not. After the cold water more images were taken. Images are sent to Toronto and results will be emailed to me, along with digital images in 2-3 weeks.

Breast thermography is popular in Europe, Australia and parts of Asia as a first-line screening procedure. In Canada thermograms are not covered by OHIP and are available through private clinics like the Thermography Clinic at 140 Oxford Street East, Suite 309. The cost varies but is around \$275 plus GST per session. Some health care providers will cover the cost. It sounds like a lot but it's really peanuts when you consider its safety, accuracy and the cost of treating women with breast cancer. Dr. Jennifer Deng says, “The biggest advantage of thermography is that it allows women to detect potential problems while there is still time to reverse the progression of breast cancer”.

Male friends have often said if they had breasts they would never leave home. I can guarantee this - if men had breasts - mammograms would be replaced with thermograms and would be covered by the government. Would I do it again? You bet only next year I'll bring my mom!

For more information on breast thermography go online to www.thermographyclinic.com or call 519-667-0666.