



Breast Practices

There's no answer to breast cancer,
but is there an alternative to the "Big Squeeze" ?
by Stephanie MacDonald

Mammograms may be encouraged by the medical establishment, but they're not without risk. Doctors agree that no dose of radiation is harmless; exposure is known to be cumulative, so women who undergo mammograms once a year increase their risk accordingly. Additionally, 60 to 80 percent of lesions recommended for biopsy are benign, resulting in a lot of unnecessary medical intervention (not to mention unnecessary freaking out). Finally there's the worrisome statistics cited by countless websites that 10 percent of actual cancerous tumors get missed.

A 1992 Canadian Medical Association study involving approximately 50,000 low risk women found those who underwent annual mammograms were actually more likely to die from breast cancer than those who did not. They concluded "there is no evidence that [mammography] screening for breast cancer is effective among women aged 40 to 49 years." (Many follow up studies have been done since, but no one refutes this study's data.)

Although this conclusion leaves my breasts off the hook for another 15 years, I had to wonder: how can I be proactive in the meantime, and how can older women mitigate the risk posed by frequent x-rays? It turns out I'm not alone. People have been interested in safer, less invasive, more reliable alternatives to the mammogram for decades. Though no screening device has been found to be 100 percent effective, breast thermography – also known as Digital Infrared Thermal Imaging – has come to the forefront of new screening technologies because it has a 90 percent accuracy rate (according to the International Academy of Clinical Thermography) and is painless and risk free.

Thermography records minute variations in body temperature. It works under the principle that pre-cancer and cancer cells have higher metabolic activity than normal cells are associated with higher vascular circulation – both of which contribute to a higher temperature relative to surrounding areas. Thermograms are equally safe and effective for young women; women with small, dense, or very large breasts; and even for women with breast implants. Research suggests thermograms can actually detect problems up to eight years before a mammogram, and there's absolutely no squishing involved. Sign me up!

Breast thermography is widely used in Europe, Australia, and parts of Asia as a first line screening procedure, but is still considered an alternative health care option in North America. "It's a consumer driven market," explains Dr. Paul Sian of the American Institute of Medical Sciences, an organization that assists foreign doctors in becoming licensed to practice in North America. "Until people start demanding it, thermography will not be considered a mainstream procedure."