



Painful mammogram? Let's talk about it

By Karyn Robinson, AART, (M)

Over the nearly 20 years I've been in radiology, I've met my share of women who are afraid of having a mammogram. Many of those had never had a mammogram, but the thought of having their breast squeezed between two solid objects while an x-ray was taken conjured up pictures of Medieval torture, I'm sure. Despite this, there are ways to keep pain to a minimum.

For women with sensitive breasts, there can be pain during a mammogram, especially if they are stressed or worried. I've found that staying calm from the outset makes the discomfort and embarrassment of a mammogram easier to take. Better technology has helped immensely as today's machines take such good pictures, fewer pounds of pressure are needed to compress the breast, plus Lincoln Hospital provides **soft paddles** for a more comfortable mammogram.

It is true that the more compression put on the breast, the more crisp the image and that's our goal – crisp, clear images. However, I've found compressing a breast past the discomfort level doesn't get a tremendously better picture. It's better to stop before the process turns painful. Mammography machines can put up to 40 pounds of pressure on a breast. I've never put anywhere near 40 pounds on any woman. In fact, my philosophy is that I only put as much compression on as a woman is comfortable with.

Through experience, I've found that individual positioning of the breast can make a huge difference in the patient's comfort level. The angle of each person's pectoral muscle is a little different. In my experience, most women lie between 40 to 45 degrees, though it's possible for that angle may be between 30 and 60 degrees. Finding the correct angle for each woman should be a top priority of any mammography technologist, because if that angle is incorrect, extra muscle and skin are put in the machine, which can increase the discomfort level tremendously.

Now, I can't say I've given 100 percent painless mammograms. As a matter of fact, in their early careers, many technologists compensate with pressure what they can't get with positioning. I was one of them. After a couple of years working with different sizes and shapes of breasts, the mystery of pectoral angle isn't much of a mystery to me now. And it definitely shouldn't be for the patient.

As a technologist, I want women to work with me and tell me when they're comfortably compressed. Tell me to back off if it's too tight or past their tolerance. I know how tight I have to have the machine to get a good image, and most women can take more pressure than I put on. For those of you who can't, talk to your technologist. Tell them of your fears up front and don't be afraid to tell them when the pressure gets to be too much.

Regular mammograms are crucial in catching breast cancer at its earliest stages. A mammogram can detect a lump the size of a mustard seed. Manual exams generally find much bigger lumps. Mammograms, monthly self-exams and an annual doctor's exam are needed to keep ahead of this killer. Putting off a mammogram because you fear it will be painful could cost you your life. Instead of taking this risk, take a chance on your mammography technologist. Work with them to get the best results with the least amount of discomfort so you can be assured of your health for years to come.

