

Nervous about the test? I've had mine, and I lived to tell. Here's the scoop

MY FIRST MAMMOGRAM

So here's the thing. It isn't as bad as you've heard.

We've all endured the mammogram horror stories from other women. Mine came from my Aunt Tilda.

"The doctors grab your boobs and put them in a cold metal machine," she told me, miming to drive home her point. "The plates squish 'em flat as a pancake!"

The story haunted me through my adolescence and young adulthood. Then, at 35, I found a lump in my breast.

Because of my family's history of breast cancer, my physician recommended a diagnostic procedure—a mammogram. Uh oh.

I argued, insisting that it was probably unnecessary. I lost.

PREPARING FOR THE EXAM

I called the mammography clinic for my appointment, and the receptionist explained the procedure. I learned that I shouldn't wear deodorant, perfume or lotions, which could interfere with the mammogram's clarity. An easily removed shirt was recommended, so that I could slip on the clinic's cotton top. If I was concerned about pain, I could take a nonaspirin pain reliever beforehand, but the best way to avoid discomfort

was to schedule my appointment for the week after my period.

Then it was my turn to ask questions. Could I eat and sleep as usual beforehand? Would anyone need to drive me home? A pause on the other end. "It's not surgery," the receptionist said.

THE DAY ARRIVES

"Hi, I'm Linda," the technologist said, offering me a light-blue gown and showing me to a private changing room. "I'm nervous," I said, on my way into the room. "And, uh, I'm sweating a lot."

"It's a common problem," Linda said soothingly. "But not a problem for us. Here, take a towelette in with you and you can wipe under your arms to freshen up." I've never appreciated a moist towelette more in my life.

I changed into my blue top and sat in a cluster of hallway seats. I filled out a questionnaire on my family history, lump location and personal history. An older woman waiting in the hallway lazed in a chair with her eyes closed. How could she look so relaxed, while I was fighting the urge to get up and leave?

Opening one eye slightly, she asked me, "Is this your first time?" I nodded.

"This is my 20th. It's no big deal," she said. "You'll see."

MY TURN

I went into the room, nervously fidgeting with my shirt as Linda discussed the questionnaire with me. After asking me to remove my top, she moved a machine into place that looked more like a dental X-ray device than the metal monstrosity described by my aunt.


The technologist gently placed my breast on the plate. I couldn't help but think she was like an experienced baker, carefully setting up the dough. "You may feel some pressure, but let me know if it's painful," she said. "The compression plate evens out the thickness of breast tissue, so we get a better image and you receive less radiation."

The pressure from the machine was mild, manageable. "This really isn't that bad," I said to her, as she positioned my breast for the next image.

"Some women find the pressure more intense than others," she said, "particularly if they schedule the appointment before or during their period." I'll bet my Aunt Tilda didn't know that, I thought smugly.

And just like that, about five minutes later, the mammogram was done. Although I was still a little concerned about the results, everything felt more manageable now.

The radiologist soon rounded the corner. "All clear," she said, smiling. "There's nothing I see to worry about at all. You'll get the full results in a week. We'll see you back at age 40 for your annual screening, unless your doctor has any additional concerns."

The official results came back—*benign*—a week later. It turned out the worst part of the mammogram was my own fear. 

DON'T FORGET YOUR ANNUAL MAMMOGRAM

Sign up for the American Cancer Society's online mammogram scheduling reminder service. Go to [cancer.org](https://www.cancer.org) and search "mammogram reminder."



RAM



EXPERT VIEW

Susan Brown, R.N., director of education at Susan G. Komen for the Cure, a foundation focused on breast cancer prevention and treatment, provides these key things to know:

WHY THIS EXAM? "Mammography is the best tool we have for finding breast cancer early."

HOW TO CALM THE FEAR "Women tell each other stories about how painful the exam is, but most women leave thinking the experience wasn't as bad as they thought."

THERE ARE TWO TYPES "With a screening exam, technologists take images of both breasts; the images are then examined by a radiologist. A diagnostic mammogram will typically focus on the specific parts of the breast in question."

HOW TO GET READY "Know what to expect, so you can prepare mentally and feel more in control at the time of the exam. Call the clinic before your appointment and ask questions."

