

Mammogram Makeover

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By Sylvia Perez

June 21, 2007 (WLS) -- It's a screening test women don't usually look forward to. But what if the test came with a comforting spa like experience followed by cocktails and a day out with the girls? Healthbeat reporter Sylvia Perez has more on this controversial medical test that's being served up with a twist.

Going to get a mammogram is not usually considered a good time. Most women put it off, because it can be uncomfortable and nerve wracking, and a recent study now shows that a significant number of American women are avoiding the test all together. A newly opened facility in suburban Wilmette that's following the trend of concierge medicine -- is trying to change women's minds about the screening exam with an experience they won't find anywhere else.

Clouds float overhead as soothing music plays in the background . Private dressing rooms hold plush robes and soft white slippers. The decor is zen-like with earth-toned colors and bamboo accents. All the sights and sounds you might expect to find at a trendy spa, but look closer: this is actually a medical facility filled with CT scans, MRI machines and digital mammography tucked away in an unassuming strip mall.

" We decided to create an environment that would help de-stress the patient and possibly make the examination more appealing," said Dr. Lisa Laurent, radiologist.

At the Advocate Imaging Specialists' Wilmette facility, it's the animated images and soundscapes on the walls and ceiling that make this so unusual. It's what's called an ambient experience.

Patients are asked, "How you would like the environment set for the room during the mammogram?"

Radiologists at the facility say the effects provide physical and emotional comfort to those anxious about the test. Yes, the actual mammogram itself is still the same. Breast tissue still has to be compressed between glass plates.

"We've gotten a lot of positive feed back that the pain is not as significant as it could have been if the music wasn't playing, and the light low, and the technologist speaking softly, and really taking all the environmental cues," said Dr. Laurent.

Mammograms are falling out of favor, especially among women over the age of 40. The screens are still regarded by most experts as the best tool to detect cancer early when it is more treatable. But a new study to be published in the journal Cancer shows there has been a significant drop in the number of women who get their yearly mammograms. That has oncologists worried.

So what's causing the decrease? Experts say it could be everything from questioning the accuracy and safety of mammograms to fear factor. Some women find the test very uncomfortable and may be more afraid of the procedure than cancer itself.

"Anything that might make them feel comfortable, make them forget they are going for a test, might help," said Dr. Virginia Kaklamani, oncologist, Northwestern Memorial Hospital.

Marianne Collins, a board member of the American Cancer Society, brought along friends for support before her mammogram.

"In the back of your mind there is a fearful worry, what if, but coming with friends and making it as comfortable and nice as they have here, I think it's a wonderful idea," Collins said.

The goal of the center is to make mammography less threatening by making the test a fun, social experience-- sort of a girl's day out.

You might think all the bells and whistles come with a hefty price tag. But doctors at the facility claim the cost of the mammograms are about the same if not cheaper than what you would pay at other centers. They say they can do the test in same day or next day appointments and can also get the results back to your physician within 24 hours.

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