

What your spit can tell you about breast cancer from Dr. William Campbell Douglass

Dear Friend,

Scientists have discovered a new way of testing for breast cancer that could make the mammogram a thing of the past—and it's about time. The test could potentially be far more accurate than the old-school mammograms—not to mention much safer. If this catches hold in the medical community, women can say goodbye to those breast- smashing vise grips. Now, all they'll have to do is open wide and say, "Ahh."

U.S. scientists are developing a breast cancer screening test that checks a woman's saliva for evidence of the disease. They say they've identified 49 proteins in saliva that can actually distinguish healthy women from those with benign breast tumors and those with malignant breast tumors.

According to Charles Streckfus, a professor at the University of Texas Dental Branch at Houston, "Breast cancer triggers a change in the type and amount of proteins in the secretions from the salivary glands." And sure enough, when the researchers tested a group of 30 women – 10 healthy, 10 with benign tumors, and 10 with malignant tumors – the protein patterns were found to be different in all three groups.

If this is true, it could finally put an end to what I've considered the most dangerous method of breast cancer screening: the mammogram. Yes, in spite of the many multimedia pushes encouraging women to get mammograms as early as possible, it's long been my belief that these tests have been doing more harm than good.

The reason? What I call "compression syndrome."

Very simply, severe compression of the breast (such as the kind that occurs during a mammogram) can lead to microscopic tissue ruptures – even in the tissue of the tumor. This tear can actually create a "leak" in the tumor, which allows the malignancy to spread and cause an acceleration of the cancer—and an earlier death.

Every doctor knows that breast lumps should be handled with a great degree of care, because handling them roughly could cause such a rupture. It's something that's drilled into your head in med school (or at least it was back in my day).

And any woman who has experienced a mammogram knows that it squashes the breast pancake-flat until it hurts—hardly what I'd call "handling with care."

Of course, the researchers say that more tests need to be done before a saliva screening test based on these findings can become common and widely available. My old friends at the FDA have to weigh in on the subject, and we all know how quickly they move. Streckfus said they would seek the government's approval for the saliva test in the next five years.

So let's say, worst case, it takes the full five years for the approval to be sought. How long do you think it'll take the FDA to get around to actually approving this potentially life-saving test? Three years? Six? Ten? Depends how much money the researchers have to put into political coffers, I suppose.

It's maddening that we live in an age when science can move at a breakneck pace, but our tired, dusty government system is still locked in the days of the horse-and-buggy.

Wouldn't this simple – and surely affordable – spit test solve so many problems? What woman wouldn't sign up to take this screening even in her early 30s, just to be sure— especially when it's known that early detection is the key to survival in the war against cancer.

Help me get the word around about this saliva screening. Maybe we can help enough political juice to get the test approved sooner rather than later.

So mad about mammograms and the FDA that I could spit,

William Campbell Douglass II, M.D.