

Donna Huizenga's mother is 98 and she hopes to live that long. The Henderson, Illinois woman's chances are much better after a 3D mammogram recently detected her breast cancer.

Huizenga realizes now that she's a walking advertisement that mammograms save lives. However, she hates to admit that until three weeks ago, she hadn't had a mammogram since 2007.

"Please, mammography does matter. They do detect cancer with mammography. I'm a living example of that." She added, "Yeah, so I have a myriad of excuses for why I didn't have a mammogram (for five years) but I'm glad now that I did."

Huizenga had a cancer scare 20 years ago when a mammogram detected calcifications in her left breast and she wound up having a biopsy. It turned out then, nothing was wrong.

Fast forward to late last month, Huizenga started noticing a problem with the same breast. At the same time, she received a life-saving letter from her regular health care provider, OSF HealthCare St. Mary Medical Center in Galesburg.

"All of a sudden in the mail, I received a letter saying, 'Hey, you are late in getting your mammogram. You need to make an appointment.'" she recalled. "And so I did, right away. I made the appointment, had the mammogram, they discovered I had a tumor in the left breast, had a biopsy the next week and they discovered it was cancerous."

The tumor was in Huizenga's milk duct and was Estrogen Receptor Positive, meaning the tumor cells have receptors that allow them to use the hormone estrogen to grow. So, Huizenga decided to have a single breast mastectomy.

So far this year, 61 mastectomies have been performed at OSF St. Mary Medical Center, up from 45 the previous year. St. Mary's Volunteer and Auxiliary Services Coordinator Shelley Willett, was surprised by the number. She learned about the increase while looking for a new project for volunteers.

Willett landed on the idea of providing mastectomy comfort kits as an optional activity for volunteers who were looking for a different challenge.

Once she brought the idea to the Patient Advisory Committee, members gave the thumbs up and helped Willett come up with the best options for what to include in the kits. It turned out to be a win-win for volunteers and patients.

“Two of them come in and they bring their sewing machines, they bring their treats. One of them has a CD player and they play music and they have a good time and they love doing this,” Willett shared.

Willett said money from a Mission Partner Jeans Day helped fund the kits early on. Now she’s selling a few small items in the gift shop at above cost, with a sign indicating additional proceeds will fund the mastectomy comfort kits like the one on display. She also received a donation of porcelain crucifixes with the word ‘Courage’ from the local [Willow Tree](#) supplier.

“Just for someone to have this in their hand, just to reflect, is something really special to me and I just thought that was nice,” said Willett whose mother had breast cancer.

The specially created mastectomy comfort kits are distributed when a patient schedules their surgery. Huizenga initially didn’t pay much attention because she was overwhelmed by the news she had cancer and would be getting a mastectomy within a week’s time. But, later Huizenga marveled at the great care and love that went into thinking of everything she would need, even though she didn’t realize it until after the fact.

Among her favorite items -- a uniquely-shaped pillow that she called, ‘heaven sent.’

“It cushioned my arm against all of the stitching -- the staples. At night, it was wonderful,” she said, displaying how it fit under her arm like a purse. “One of the things I have to kind of laugh about is somebody put candy in there and let me tell you, that night in the hospital that chocolate was all gone at one sitting. So there were little things in there that I really appreciated.

But even before her surgery, Huizenga found herself using a notebook and the pink pen looped into the binder. It became her diary and the single-source for all important information.

“Things I wanted to tell family members. And, I really liked it and then after the surgery when they put the ports in, I kept a diary of my ports everyday so I could give information to the doctor when I went back,” she said.

During cancer treatment, the care team often gives treatment into a catheter with a small port attached to it. It can be used to give chemotherapy or medicine into your vein, or to take blood. Fortunately, Huizenga did not need chemotherapy or radiation. She'll be on maintenance drugs for five years; an outcome she calls great despite what was a scary diagnosis.

Huizenga hasn't used one item in her comfort kit yet but she will soon. It's information about the local breast cancer support group she plans to attend. The 73 year-old admits she went to 'some dark places' immediately after her diagnosis, but now she's optimistic and wants to share that hope with other patients.

Breast Cancer Awareness Month in October serves as a reminder to know your risk of breast cancer because it is the first step toward early intervention for both men and women. [Schedule your yearly mammogram](#) if you are over 40 or talk with your doctor about earlier screening if you have a history of breast cancer in your family. You can also visit osfhealthcare.org/breast or click [here](#) for a free online breast cancer risk assessment.