The breast self-examination (BSE) is an effective tool to help find cancer early if it develops. A BSE is easy to perform and can be done at home. When breast cancer is detected in its early stages, the odds for survival improve greatly. With a BSE, you also become more aware of the normal look and feel of your breasts, making it easier to notice changes.

A BSE is not a substitute for a mammogram or a clinical breast exam. Check with your PA to see when to get those screenings.

The Best Time to Examine
You should perform a BSE once a month. The best time is after your period ends, when your breasts are not tender or swollen. If you have passed menopause, perform the exam on the same day every month.

Check your BSE technique with your health care provider to make sure you are examining your breasts correctly. You should be completing the following three steps each time you perform a BSE.

Step 1: In the Shower
You might find this portion of the BSE easier if your hands are slippery with water and soap. Put your left hand on your hip and reach your right hand over to feel the left armpit. Look in the armpit for any lumps or thickening. Repeat with your other armpit.

Check above and below your collarbone on both sides of your body for lumps or thickening.

Then, support one of your breasts with one hand while using the other hand to feel the tissue. Press your breast gently with your fingers, moving up and down along the entire breast, from your bra line to your collarbone. Repeat this on your other breast.

Step 2: Lying Down
Now lie down and place your right arm behind your head. With the three middle fingers of your left hand use small, circular motions to feel for lumps in your right breast.

One way to examine your breasts is with a spiral pattern. Start feeling the outermost part of your breast and keep moving in an inward spiral until you reach your nipple. Or, you can use the up-and-down motion to inspect the entire breast. (see illustrations)

Always be in constant contact with your breast, and don’t forget to feel the upper areas by your armpit. Use different levels of pressure so you can feel the tissue closest to the skin as well as tissue closest to the chest and ribs.

To finish, place your fingers flat on the top of your nipple. Press inward to feel beneath the nipple for any changes.

Repeat these steps on your other side, with your left hand behind your head, using your right hand to feel your left breast.

Step 3: In Front of a Mirror
Simply look at your breasts in the mirror to see if you notice any changes in size, shape or texture. Don’t worry if your breasts are not the same size or shape—most women’s aren’t. Also check your nipples for sores, peeling or change in direction.

Put your hands on your hips and press down firmly to tighten the chest muscles beneath your breasts. Turn left and right to inspect the sides of your breasts.

Bend forward rolling your shoulders and elbows. Again, inspect your breasts for changes.

Put your hands behind your head and press your hands forward. Check both sides of your body to inspect your breasts’ outer portions. You also should inspect underneath your breasts. Lift them with your hands if you need to.

Inspect your nipples. Use your fingers to pull them outward and look for any discharge.

Detecting Changes
Immediately report any changes you find to your PA, including changes in size, shape, contour or texture of either breast; a mass or a lump; a change in the feel or appearance of the skin on your breast or your nipple; fluid discharge from the nipples that is either bloody or clear; or redness of the breast or nipple.