A light, a mirror and a plastic vaginal speculum are the basic tools of self-examination. (A speculum is a device used to look into body cavities and canals. In ancient times, it also meant mirror or body of knowledge.) By inserting the speculum into your vagina and shining a light into the mirror, you can see your cervix, the neck of your uterus. You can also see the os (opening) in your cervix, where the menstrual blood and other secretions come out; vaginal secretions, if there are any; and the vaginal walls. If you do self-examination throughout your cycle, you might well observe changes in the color of your cervix, which can, for some women, be very dramatic. You might note a difference in texture: for instance, your cervix might be fleshy just before your menstrual period. Or you might be able to see any irregularities that might be present.

Over the last ten years small groups of women have spread the concept of self-examination throughout the United States and to other parts of the world. They have focused on sharing experiences and information and on exploring normal, healthy differences and common health concerns about menstruation, vaginal conditions, birth control, hormones and menopause, the special concerns of lesbian health and a variety of other topics.

Most medical practitioners focus on disease and emphasize drugs and surgery which all too often have undesirable, even severe, physical effects. They have been uninterested, for the most part, in the extensive benefits of exercise and nutrition, or in sharing cheap, effective self-help remedies with women. For example, many doctors have ignored the most widely known self-help remedy for a yeast condition—vaginal cream in favor of strong vaginal creams, which they admit won’t necessarily do more than suppress the symptoms. Many doctors are also oriented toward high profit, so that people’s ability to pay directly influences the quality of health care they receive.

The self-help approach, which differs from the popular self-care movement that places the responsibility for health maintenance solely on the individual, directly challenges physicians’ control of routine health care and healing, especially women’s reproductive health.

Self-help has also developed. The role of the patient advocate, a health worker or friend who supports and promotes the rights and decisions of someone who is undergoing medical treatment. Another important aspect of this approach is the insistence on informed consent, that is, that people have full information about their condition, as well as all of the possible adverse effects of any treatment that is planned, so that they can decide what risks they are willing to take.

Every woman’s body is different, but whatever your age, ethnic background, economic situation or sexual orientation, you can learn from self-examination. Women will soon be able to buy a plastic vaginal speculum as easily as a toothbrush, in any drugstore or supermarket (may even in department stores), and, through its use, begin to acquire knowledge about their bodies and health that has, for years, been solely in the possession of physicians.