Chairwoman's Corner
By PGST Chairwoman Amber Caldera

October is National Breast Cancer Awareness Month.

In the U.S., breast cancer is the most common type of cancer among Native American/Indigenous women and the second leading cause of death. Among all women, one in eight will be diagnosed with breast cancer in their lifetime. Unfortunately, Native Americans are far more likely to die from the disease because they are typically diagnosed later than white women.

In Native communities, there can be significant barriers to receiving support and care. This gap exists because of a lack of access to healthcare providers and transportation. Medical mistrust also runs high among Native Americans, no matter the gender.

In Kitsap County, our Native communities are lucky to be supported by tribally owned and operated health centers that ensure our members always have the best access to preventative care. For example, for years, the PGST Health Center has worked to educate our community's women about the need for annual breast cancer screenings and how to assess their personal risk. They've partnered with mobile mammogram providers and held events for survivors to share their stories.

These efforts have all had the same goal: help women understand their risk for breast cancer and provide tools to help them manage it. Here are a few tips from the PGST Health Center that are useful to any woman:

Know Your Family Risk. Genetics play a significant role in personal risk. Talk to family members and Elders around you to learn about your shared health history, including instances of breast, ovarian, or prostate cancer—all of which may indicate an increased risk of developing breast cancer. Having these conversations also help family members support one another and normalize freely sharing and discussing this information.

Listen to Your Body. Perform monthly breast exams a few days after your period ends or at the same time every month. Make note of any changes, including lumps, swelling, any pain, or changes in texture or shape. If you experience any of these, make an appointment with your doctor even if you've had a recent mammogram. Time is the most valuable resource when it comes to treating breast cancer.

Know and Mitigate Your Personal Risks. In addition to genetics and family history, personal health and behaviors can contribute to overall risk. Smoking, regular alcohol consumption, being born female, and being overweight increase lifetime risk, while breastfeeding and exercising at least three times a week can help lower it.

Get Screened Early and Regularly. Most women should begin having annual mammograms at the age of 40. If you have a higher lifetime risk, talk to your doctor about getting screened early. During your first mammogram, you can learn about your breast density. High density breast tissue may increase lifetime risk.

Whenever you and your doctor decide its best to start screenings, keep up on the schedule. Breast cancer is usually at its most treatable when the tumor is small and you're experiencing no symptoms.

This year, on Friday, October 16, from 1:30 to 4:30 pm at Kiana Lodge, the PGST Health Center is hosting the Indigenous Pink Gathering for Native American/Indigenous people. The afternoon will include a lunch, a regalia fashion show, speakers, and lots of information about breast cancer from medical providers, survivors, and family members who have lost loved ones. If you're a tribal member and want to understand more about how to protect yourself or have a connection to breast cancer through a loved one, we invite you attend. It just may save a life.