



Lesbian Health Lesbians and Sexual Health

Sexual health refers to the many factors that impact upon sexual function, pleasure and reproduction, including physical, mental and emotional issues. However sexual health can also impact upon our physical and emotional health, relationships and self-image.

Lesbian Sex and Sexual Health

Lesbian relationships often place a high value on emotional intimacy as well as sexual pleasure.

Sexual practices between women are diverse. They may include an emphasis on kissing, licking and sucking, oral stimulation, both vaginal and anal (rimming), penetration, both vaginal and anal with either fingers, a hand or sex toys such as dildos.

Communication about your preferred sexual practices with your sexual partner is very important so you can both understand each other, and give and receive the most pleasure.

Sexually Transmissible Infections

Sexually Transmissible Infections (STIs) are infections that can be passed from person to person during sex. Contrary to popular belief, STIs are common in the lesbian community and can be easily spread from woman to woman via unprotected sex.

Health care providers and lesbians may assume that women who have sex with women are not at risk of contracting STIs. This is a serious misconception.

Lesbians are at risk of contracting and passing on human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), genital warts, herpes, hepatitis B, and syphilis to other women during sex. Women can also transmit Chlamydia, pubic lice, scabies and gonorrhoea. Hepatitis A is a risk if there's been contact with faeces during anal sex or rimming.

Transmission of STIs

The following activities can result in the transmission of STIs:

- Unprotected oral sex, especially when a woman is bleeding
- Unprotected rimming
- Sharing sex toys without washing between use or without using a condom
- Sharing needles

Signs and Symptoms of STIs

STIs often have no signs or symptoms.

However if you notice any of the following symptoms, you should consult a health practitioner:

- Unusual discharge from the vagina
- Pain during sex or urination
- Sores, blisters, ulcers, warts or rashes in the genital area
- Itchiness or irritation in the genital area
- Persistent diarrhoea
- Fever, flu-like symptoms or abdominal pain

STI Treatment

Many STIs are easily treated once they are diagnosed. Treatments can include:

- Antibiotics, either one high dose or a full course, for bacteria infections: syphilis, Chlamydia, gonorrhoea
- Medicated shampoos, lotions and creams for parasites: pubic lice and scabies
- There are no cures for viral STIs, however there are treatments to help control the symptoms: HIV, genital warts, herpes, hepatitis A and B

STI Prevention

You can reduce your risk of contracting or passing on an STI by:

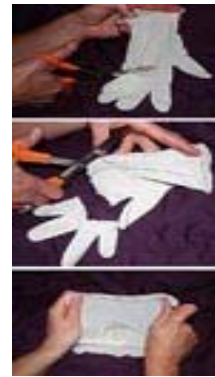
- 1) Practicing methods to reduce the likelihood of sharing vaginal fluids or blood during sex, including:
 - Using dams during oral/vaginal and oral/anal sex
 - Using latex gloves and water based lubricant when touching/penetrating the vagina/anus
 - Using condoms and water based lubricant when sharing vibrators, dildos and other sex aids
- 2) Having regular sexual health check ups!

Even if you have no symptoms it is still possible to have an STI and pass it on.

You can also use a latex glove as a dam

Follow these simple instructions:

1. Cut 4 fingers off the glove, leaving the thumb in place
2. Slit up the side opposite to the thumb
3. Rinse talcum off the glove
4. Put some water-base lubricant on the side with the thumb protruding
5. Place the lubricated side on your partner's vulva
6. Hold the glove in place with both hands, or have your partner hold it covering her labia
7. Use your tongue to stimulate your partner. Insert your tongue into the thumb for extra fun!!
8. After sex, be sure to dispose of the glove safely. Turn it inside out and wash your hands. Only use each glove once



If you experience sensitivity to latex, non-latex gloves are available. Lube is used because it's lovely and slippery, reduces the risk of abrasions and opportunities for bugs that cause infections to move into the blood system. It also reduces the risk of latex breaking.

Getting Tested

An annual test is a good guideline. Even if you have no symptoms it is still possible to have an STI and pass it on. In this case, getting tested is the only way to know.

It is a good idea to get tested regularly if:

- If you are having sex with different casual partners
- If you are in a non-monogamous relationship
- If you are in a new relationship, whether or not it is monogamous

STI Screening

Sexual health checks are not always intrusive. Having a check up doesn't always mean you have to get naked or deal with needles. If no symptoms are present, most often a urine sample is all that is required.

However if symptoms are present or you have been involved in unsafe practices a check up may involve:

- Blood tests for HIV, syphilis, and hepatitis A, B and C viruses
- Urine sample and swabs collected from inside the vagina and anus for Chlamydia and gonorrhoea
- External examinations of genitals are also carried out to detect infections such as genital herpes, genital warts, pubic lice, scabies and bacterial vaginosis

You may have to ask specifically for an HIV test

Bacterial Vaginosis

Bacterial Vaginosis (BV) is not an STI. It is a vaginal infection that may be associated with sexual behaviours. An infection occurs when the normal balance of

bacteria in the vagina is disrupted by an overgrowth of certain bacteria.

Rates of BV are significantly higher in lesbian women than heterosexual women.

BV Transmission

It is not totally clear how BV is transmitted. However transmission appears to be associated with the exchange of vaginal fluids such as:

- Having sex with a woman who has BV
- Sharing sex toys such as dildos with a partner without using a condom or washing the toys between each partners use
- Changing sexual partners
- Douching (process of rinsing out the rectum in preparation for anal sex and rimming)

BV Signs and Symptoms

- Excessive, thin grey or white vaginal discharge that sticks to the vaginal walls
- Fishy or musty, unpleasant vaginal odour, most noticeable after sex
- Vaginal itching and irritation.

BV Treatment

BV treatment is as simple as getting an antibiotic from your Doctor.

BV Prevention

BV can be prevented by:

- Using different fingers or hands for different areas during sex (reducing the likelihood of sharing vaginal fluids)
- Using condoms on sex toys
- Limiting the number of sexual partners

Finding the Right Health Practitioner For You!!!

It is important to find a health professional that will understand your needs and that you can be open with about your whole medical and sexual history.

- Try asking friends if they have or know of an understanding health practitioner they can recommend.
- Go to the QAHC Referral Directory www.quac.org.au/referral to find services with experience in working with LGBT clients
- Look in the LGBT press for advertisements for health services

For more information

Family Planning QLD

(07) 3250 0240

Clinic locations throughout QLD go to www.fpq.com.au/locations.stm

Women's Health Queensland Wide Health Information Line

(07) 3839 9988 or 1800 017 676 (toll free)

www.womhealth.org.au

Queensland Health: Sexual Health Line

(07) 3240 0240

www.health.qld.gov.au/sexhealth

Queensland Health Pap Smear Register

1800 777 790

Queensland Association for Healthy Communities

www.qahc.org.au/lesbian

Gay and Lesbian Welfare Association

Counselling and referral (7pm-10pm)

(07) 3017 1717 or 1800 184 527 (toll free)

www.glwa.org.au

Open Doors Youth Service Inc.

SEQ LGBT Young People & Families

(07) 3257 7660

www.opendoors.net.au

Girl2girl Lesbian health: www.girl2girl.info

DIALOG Lesbian health care information

www.dialog.unimelb.edu.au/index.html

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