



Sexuality can affect how we address our health needs, access health services and result in different patterns of health outcomes for lesbians compared to heterosexual women.

Lesbians and Breast Cancer

Lesbians may have a 2-3 times higher incidence of breast cancer compared to heterosexual women. This may be linked to the higher prevalence of risk factors related to breast cancer among lesbians.

Risk factors especially relevant to lesbians include:

- Not having children or giving birth to your first child after the age of 30
- Not breast feeding
- Obesity
- High rates of alcohol use

Lesbians also access health services less frequently than members of the general community and have low rates of screening:

- Lesbians appear to be less likely to get mammograms and perform regular breast self-examination than heterosexual women
- The increased incidence of breast cancer may relate to the low rates of preventative screening or later presentation of symptoms

Lesbians, as with the whole LGBTI community, are more likely to attend health services after specific health problems arise.

Incidence of Breast Cancer in Australia

Breast cancer is the most common malignant cancer in Australian women.

Over 11,000 women are diagnosed with breast cancer each year in Australia.

Breast cancer can occur at any age. However the risk of developing breast cancer increases with age.

- More than 70% of all breast cancer occurs in women aged 50 and over

Women affected by breast cancer:

- 1 in 11 by age 75
- 1 in 8 by age 85

Risk factors for developing Breast Cancer

The most important risk factors include:

- Getting older
- Having a strong family history of breast cancer
- Having previously been diagnosed with breast cancer or DCIS (ductal carcinoma in situ)

However 9 out of 10 women with Breast Cancer do not have a family history of the disease.

It is important that women of all ages conduct regular self examinations to make sure that you are aware of the normal look and feel of your breasts.

Factors associated with an increase of risk for Breast Cancer

- Starting menstruation early (before 12)
- Starting menopause late (after 55)
- Not having children or having your first child after the age of 30 years
- Not breastfeeding: the more months spent breastfeeding, the lower the risk of developing breast cancer
- Taking combined Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) after menopause, especially for 5 years or longer
- Gaining a lot of weight in adulthood, especially after menopause
- Drinking alcohol, more than 2 standard drinks a day

What Can You Do to Protect Yourself

Keep Healthy

- Cut alcohol consumption to two drinks or less a day
- Exercise regularly
- Eat lots of fruit and vegetables, reduce animal and saturated fats
- Maintain a healthy body weight

Check your Breasts

Look for changes in:

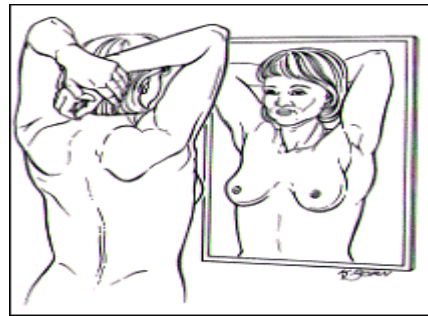
- Size or shape of your breast or nipple
- Unusual thickening in breasts
- Lumps that are painful or tender
- Skin over your breast, such as redness or dimpling
- A discharge from your nipples

Most lumps are not cancers. However, any new lump that does not go away after 3-4 weeks should be examined by a health practitioner. You should also report any unusual persistent pain, especially if it is in one breast.

How Do I Check for Lumps Myself?

So you can recognise the normal size and shape of your breasts standing in front of a mirror and look at your breasts with:

- Your arms at your side
- Your arms raised behind your head
- Your arms on your hips and your chest muscles flexed



Lie down with a pillow under your left shoulder:

- Put your left hand behind your head and feel your left breast with the pads of the 3 middle fingers on your right hand
- Start at the outer edge and work around your breast in circles, getting closer to your nipple with each circle
- After you have checked your breast, squeeze your nipple gently and look for fluid coming out of the nipple
- Be sure to include the area up to your collarbone and out to your armpit



Do the same to your right breast with the pillow under your right shoulder.

Breast Cancer Screening

Currently there is no way of preventing Breast Cancer. Screening aims to reduce the amount of deaths related to breast cancer through early detection.

- Mammograms are X-rays of the breast used to look for signs of breast cancer and investigate changes in the breasts
- They also look for signs of breast cancer in women who do not have breast changes. This is called a 'screening mammogram'
- Mammograms can detect small tumours before they are detectable by women and trained clinicians

The survival rate for women with Breast Cancer is significantly improved through early detection.

Regular Screening

Mammograms are less effective for younger women (below 49 years) as breasts are denser, making it more difficult to detect signs of breast cancer.

- Women under 40 years: regular screenings are not recommended unless there is a family history of breast cancer, or a previous diagnosis has already been made.
- Women over 40 years are recommended to have a screening every two years

Women over 40 years can access free mammograms every two years through BreastScreen Australia. For more information go to:

www.breastscreen.info.au

Golden Rule for women's health

Always ask for a Pap smear at the same time as having a mammogram.

Women at increased risk of breast cancer

If you have had any form of breast cancer you will need regular follow-up screenings to ensure that if the cancer reoccurs it can be detected and treated promptly.

- Your regular follow-up will include regular mammograms and/or ultrasound and a physical examination of your breasts by the doctor
- If you are at higher risk of breast cancer due to a family history of breast cancer, you might also need an individual program of regular tests

Examinations by your Doctor

You may benefit from having your breasts checked regularly by your doctor, particularly if:

- You are not having regular mammograms
- You are unsure about what is 'normal' for your breasts
- You are not confident in giving yourself breast examinations

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

Supporting women with Breast Cancer

To find a list of Breast Cancer Support Groups in QLD go to:
www.health.qld.gov.au/breastscreen/breastcancer/support.asp

The QLD Cancer Fund provides a phone and face-to-face counselling and support groups who are coping with cancer to find out more go to:
www.qldcancer.com.au/support.asp

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
1800 017 676 (toll free outside Brisbane)
www.womhealth.org.au

BreastScreen Australia Program

www.breastscreen.info.au/internet/screening/publishing.nsf/Content/breastscreen-1lp

National Breast Cancer Centre

www.nbcc.org.au

Queensland Association for Healthy Communities

www.qahc.org.au/lesbian

Gay and Lesbian Welfare Association

Counseling 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

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National Breast Cancer Centre. 2006. *BreastHealth*. www.breasthealth.com.au
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Y-ME National Breast Cancer Organisation
http://www.y-me.org/information/treatment_side_effects/radiation.php

Family Doctor: health Information for the whole family.
<http://familydoctor.org/018.xml>