

Lesbians, Bisexual Women, and Safe Sex Factsheet

Generally, lesbians are at low risk of HIV infection, unplanned pregnancy, or becoming infected an STD. However, even though sex between women has a reduced likelihood of transmitting STDs, transmission *can* still occur. Sex between women is *not* always safe, and therefore women need to know the risks and how to protect themselves.

Prevalence: Many lesbians and WPW have had sex with men. And, even when women self-identify as lesbians, they may continue to have sex with men. HPV, herpes (HSV) infections, and syphilis are commonly transmitted between women, as they require only skin-to-skin or mucosa contact, which can easily occur in the context of lesbian sex. Other STDs, including HIV and bacterial vaginitis, have been diagnosed in lesbians.

Safe Sex: 'Safe sex' is any activity through which you are at *no risk* of becoming infected with HIV or a sexually transmitted infection (STI). [HIV](#) is found in the blood and the sexual fluids of an infected person, and in the breast-milk of an infected woman. HIV transmission occurs when sufficient amounts of these fluids get inside the body of an uninfected person. Sexual transmission of HIV is most common between men, and between men and women, but it does also happen between women – something that's often ignored in sexual health information.

So, *safe sex* is sex that doesn't allow any infected body fluid to enter your body – and doesn't allow you to infect your partner, either. Activities that are safe include hugging, touch, massage, and masturbation. Sex toys are fine, too – just put a condom over them, and if you switch from one person's body to another then change the condom. You can also use dental dams for oral sex (gloves or condoms cut flat or plastic wrap can also be used), gloves for manual penetration, and condoms for sex toys or penile-vaginal intercourse. Non-latex materials are also available.

Other Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs or STDs)

Although we have seen that lesbian and bisexual women are at low risk of getting HIV from sex with another woman, many other sexually transmitted infections - such as [herpes](#) or thrush - are just as common for lesbians as for women who have sex with men.

- Thrush is an overgrowth of yeast causing vaginal itching and soreness, often with a white discharge. It is possibly passed via sex between women, though oral sex is low risk.
- Bacterial Vaginosis/BV or Gardnerella is an overgrowth of vaginal bacteria causing a smelly discharge, which lesbians often experience. There is a possible link with perfumed soaps and bath oils.
- [Genital Warts](#) are painless bumps on the vulva, in the vagina, on the cervix or round the anus. They can be passed through contact with the wart, for example

by touching, rubbing or sharing sex toys. It is unlikely non-genital warts, such as on hands, can be transferred to the genitals.

- Trichomonas vaginalis (TV) gives a frothy, itchy vaginal discharge and is passed on by contact with the vagina only, for example by touching or sharing sex toys.
- [Herpes](#) can cause painful sores on the inside of the vulva/vagina or anus (these are genital herpes) or on the mouth (cold sores). Herpes can be passed on through contact with a sore, for example by touching, fondling or sharing sex toys. Oral sex when a cold sore is present can also transmit the virus. It can be possible to have the herpes virus, be infectious and yet never have had any symptoms.
- Crabs/Pubic Lice cling to pubic and other body hair causing itching and sometimes blood spots from bites. They are spread through naked body/skin contact.
- [Chlamydia](#) and [Gonorrhoea](#) are rare in lesbians but if they are present may be passed on through sharing sex toys or rubbing vulvas together. Often there are no symptoms, though there may be a discharge. The first sign of both infections may be pain in the pelvic region (pelvic inflammatory disease or PID). There is a risk of infertility for women who have had untreated chlamydia.
- [Syphilis](#) is very infectious and close skin contact during sex can pass it on.
- [Hepatitis B](#) is a viral infection that in its most infectious forms can easily be passed on in sex - for example by touching or sharing sex toys. There are often no symptoms, though it can cause jaundice (yellow skin) or nausea.

Treatment is available for all the sexually transmitted infections mentioned above, often with antibiotics, and most can be cleared up quite rapidly. It is vital you seek seek help as soon as you notice any symptoms and that you do not have sexual contact that could pass on any infection until it has been dealt with.

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Resources:

<http://www.avert.org/>

JM Marrazzo. Barriers to Infectious Disease Care among Lesbians.

<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/EID/vol10no11/04-0467.htm>