

Sexual Health Information for Lesbians & Bisexual Women

There are very few sexual health services specifically for lesbians or bisexual women. Partly, this has been due to the epidemiology of HIV among gay and bisexual men, but it also reflects a wider invisibility of the needs of lesbian/bisexual women in all aspects of health. While lesbians (and to a lesser extent bisexual women) are generally less likely to be subject to Sexual Transmitted Infections (STIs), it does not mean there is always no risk at all.

Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)

Overall, the risk of transmitting sexual infections between women is low. This risk depends on who you are having sex with and what you are doing with them. Unprotected sex with men (vaginal, anal & oral) may increase your chance of acquiring an STI. Infections could also be passed from one person to another on hands and sex toys when having sex with women or with men.

Lesbians and bisexual women are not immune from sexually transmitted infections (STIs), yet can be complacent about getting tested for them, according to Ruth Hunt at the charity Stonewall. She says that “Women can catch STIs such as herpes, genital warts and chlamydia when exchanging bodily fluids and any one-on-one contact, such as oral sex or using the same hand when touching yourself and then your partner, can put you at risk. Two women that are both menstruating are at a higher risk, too.

A survey of lesbian and bisexual women by Stonewall revealed that half of those who have been screened had an STI. And of those women who had an STI, one in four had only had sex with women in the previous five years.

Sometimes, lesbian and bisexual women are told they don't need to be tested for STIs. This is not the case:

Symptoms of STIs

Thrush

Thrush is caused by an overgrowth of yeast called candida. Symptoms may include vulval and vaginal itching, pain and soreness on penetration, burning when passing urine and a thick, white discharge. It's possible for women to transmit thrush during sex through touching and sharing sex toys. Thrush can be treated with medicated cream, pessaries and tablets, which can be bought from a chemist. Go to your GP or sexual health service if your symptoms persist.

Genital herpes

This is caused by a virus, which can spread if you have vaginal, anal or oral sex, or share sex toys. It can also cause cold sores on the mouth and nose. Symptoms include painful blisters and ulcers around the genital area, although some women may have no symptoms.

Anti-viral tablets can help the healing process and shorten the length of the episode. Read more about genital herpes.

Genital warts

These are fleshy growths in the vulval and anal region. They may be itchy but are usually painless. They are caused by certain strains of human papilloma virus (HPV), which are usually sexually acquired through skin contact, such as rubbing vulvas together.

Women with genital warts do not need more regular smear tests than those without them. There are a variety of treatment options, including freezing and medicated creams.

Trichomonas vaginalis (TV)

TV can be passed between women during any sexual activity that involves the exchange of vaginal fluid. Symptoms include a frothy discharge, discomfort when passing urine, vulval soreness, and sometimes an unpleasant vaginal odour. Some women don't have any symptoms. TV is treated with antibiotics.

Chlamydia and Gonorrhoea

These STIs are caused by bacteria, which can infect the cervix, rectum, throat and urethra. There may be a discharge but usually there are no symptoms. If the conditions are not treated, the bacteria may lead to an infection in the fallopian tubes and infertility.

Chlamydia and gonorrhoea can be passed between women through shared sex toys, hands and by rubbing vulvas together. Treatment is with antibiotics.

If you have any of the symptoms above or are worried you may have an STI, speak to your GP or visit an STI clinic. Getting tested regularly is a good idea to ensure you have a healthy sex life. NHS services are free and confidential for everyone.

Tips for safer sex for lesbian and bisexual women

- If you're using sex toys, use a new condom for each partner or between penetration of different orifices. Sex toys should be washed with soap (preferably an antibacterial soap) and water between sessions.
- Avoid oral sex if either of you has any cuts or sores in the mouth or on the lips, or use a dental dam. A dental dam is a latex or polyurethane (very thin, soft plastic) square, of about 15cm by 15cm, which you can use to cover the anus or female genitals during oral sex. It acts as a barrier to help prevent sexually transmitted infections passing from one person to another.
- Some infections can be transmitted by hands, fingers and mutual vulval rubbing. Wash your hands before and after sex.
- Wear latex gloves and use plenty of water-based lubricant for vaginal and anal fisting.
- If you have vaginal, anal or oral sex with a man, use a condom. When used correctly, condoms protect against unintended pregnancy and STIs. In addition to using condoms, find out about the form of contraception that suits you best.

Vaginal Health

Vaginal health is an important part of a woman's overall health. Vaginal problems can affect many aspects of sexual health including the desire for sex and ability to reach orgasm. Ongoing vaginal health issues can also affect other areas of your life, causing stress or relationship problems and impact on self-confidence..

The vagina is self-cleansing, so there's no need to wash inside it (douching). Vaginal soreness and vulval irritation can be caused by over use of perfumed soaps, bubble baths and shower gels.

The vagina is a tube of muscle inside a woman's body that runs from the cervix (the opening of the womb) to the vaginal opening. The external sex organs, which are called the vulva, surround the vaginal opening.

Looking after your everyday health can help keep your vagina in good shape, says Dr Suzy Elneil, consultant in urogynaecology at University College Hospital, London, and spokesperson for Wellbeing of Women. "Generally, good vaginal health is maintained by making sure you're in good general health," she explains. "This includes healthy diet and exercise. Normal exercise helps maintain good vaginal function, as walking and running helps the pelvic floor to tone up and helps ensure good general health."

Vaginal Secretions or Discharge

It's normal to produce clear or white secretions (discharge) from your vagina. This mucus is produced naturally from the neck of the womb, known as the cervix.

“Vaginal discharge is not ‘always a bad sign’,” says Dr Elneil. “There is a myth that copious clear or white discharge is associated with sexually transmitted infections. Changes in the amount of discharge can be 100% hormonal – in other words, linked to the menstrual cycle, pregnancy or menopause.”

The character and amount of vaginal discharge varies throughout your menstrual cycle. Around the time that your ovary releases an egg (ovulation), your discharge usually becomes thicker and stretchy, like raw egg white.

The vagina contains more bacteria than any other part of a woman's body, after the bowel. Healthy discharge doesn't have a strong smell or colour. You may feel an uncomfortable wetness, but you shouldn't have any itching or soreness around your vagina. If there are any changes to your discharge that aren't normal for you, such as a change in colour or if it starts to smell or itch, see your GP or sexual health service as you might have an infection.

Bacteria in the Vagina

There are lots of bacteria inside the vagina, and they're there to protect it. Professor Ronnie Lamont, spokesperson for the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG), says: “The vagina contains more bacteria than anywhere else in the body after the bowel, but the bacteria are there for a reason.”

The good bacteria inside the vagina:

- provide “numerical dominance”: they outnumber other potential harmful bacteria that might enter the vagina
- help to keep the vagina's pH balance (how acidic the vagina is) at an even level, which helps to keep the balance of bacteria healthy
- can produce bacteriocins (naturally occurring antibiotics) to reduce or kill other bacteria entering the vagina
- produce a substance that stops invading bacteria sticking to the vagina walls, which prevents bacteria from invading the tissues

If the balance of bacteria is disturbed, this can lead to infection and inflammation. Bacteria called lactobacilli help to keep the vagina's pH balance at its normal low level (less than pH 4.5), which also prevents the growth of other organisms. If the pH of the vagina increases (in other words, if it gets less acidic), the quality or amount of lactobacilli can fall and other bacteria can multiply. This can result in infections such as bacterial vaginosis or thrush, which can cause symptoms including itching, irritation and abnormal discharge.

Washing your Vagina

It's a good idea to avoid perfumed soaps, gels and antiseptics as these can affect the healthy balance of bacteria and pH levels in the vagina, and cause irritation. Use plain, unperfumed soaps to wash the area around the vagina (the vulva) gently every day. The vagina will clean itself inside your body with natural vaginal secretions (discharge).

Douches

A douche flushes water up into the vagina, clearing out vaginal secretions. Some women use a douche to "clean" the vagina, but using a douche can disrupt the normal vaginal bacteria so it isn't recommended that you use one. There is no evidence that douching protects against STIs or vaginal infections, and it may increase the risk.

Scented Wipes and Vaginal Deodorants

These perfumed products can disrupt the vagina's healthy, natural balance. "If nature had intended the vagina to smell like roses or lavender, it would have made the vagina smell like roses or lavender," says Professor Lamont.

Washing with water and a plain soap should be all you need to keep your vagina healthy. It's normal for the vagina to have a scent. "Vaginal odour can change at different times of the reproductive cycle and shouldn't always be thought of as being a sign of infection or illness," says Dr Elneil.

If you're worried about the way your vagina smells, if the smell is unpleasant, or you're using perfumed products to cover up your vagina's smell, you should see your GP. You might have an infection that needs treatment. The most common cause of unusual vaginal discharge is bacterial vaginosis, which can cause an unpleasant smell. Your discharge may:

- become thin and watery
- change to a white or grey colour
- develop a strong, unpleasant, fishy smell, particularly after sexual intercourse

Other symptoms of BV can include:

- pain during intercourse
- pain when passing urine
- some light bleeding from your vagina
- BV does not usually cause itching or irritation.

Around half of all women with BV do not have any symptoms. This is known as asymptomatic BV. BV is easily treated with antibiotics, so see your GP or sexual health service if you're worried.

Cervical Screening

Some lesbians who have never had sex with a man believe that they do not need a cervical screening check or may have been incorrectly advised that they do not need one. All women aged between 25 and 64 regardless of sexual orientation should be invited for cervical screening as being screened regularly means that any abnormal changes in the cervix can be identified early on and, if necessary, treated to stop cancer developing.

Sometimes, lesbian women have been advised by health workers that they don't need screening because they don't have sex with men. Or, they may be told by other lesbians that they don't need to be screened. However, women should be offered screening and consider attending, regardless of their sexual orientation.

All women aged between 25 and 64 are invited for cervical screening. Being screened regularly means that any abnormal changes in the cervix can be identified early on and, if necessary, treated to stop cancer developing. Find out more about cervical screening.

A cervical screening test, or smear test, is a method of detecting abnormal (pre-cancerous) cells in the cervix in order to prevent cervical cancer. The cervix is the entrance to the womb from the vagina.

Cervical screening is not a test for cancer; it is a test to check the health of the cells of the cervix. Most women's test results show that everything is normal, but for 1 in 20 women the test will show some abnormal changes in the cells of the cervix.

Most of these changes will not lead to cervical cancer and the cells may go back to normal on their own. However, in some cases, the abnormal cells need to be treated to prevent them becoming cancerous.

Usually, cervical screening is carried out at your GP practice, by the practice nurse. You can choose to be screened at a Sexual Health Clinic/Genito-Urinary Medicine (GUM) Clinic if you prefer. You can also be screened at a Family Planning Clinic or a Well Woman Clinic.