

Being Healthy

We all deserve to be healthy, regardless of our age, race, income, sexual orientation or gender identity.

Being healthy means taking care of our physical, emotional, sexual, psychological and spiritual needs.

For lesbians and women who have sex with women, this can be a challenge given the stress of dealing with prejudice and discrimination.

But being lesbian is a wonderful, positive experience for many women and sexual orientation can be a source of pride and celebration.

Many women get healthier after coming out as they feel more in touch with who they really are and more in control of their lives.

Some things that can help you to be healthy include:

- ✦ Accepting and loving yourself for who you are.
- ✦ Coming out if you feel safe and comfortable.
- ✦ Finding personal strengths, other people, and activities that make you feel good about yourself.
- ✦ Connecting with others who support you in the lesbian and queer communities.
- ✦ Figuring out what may be stressful for you and learning the best ways to deal with stress.
- ✦ Learning about your body so that you know what to do to take care of yourself.

Getting Good Health Care

For lesbians and women who have sex with women, getting good health care can be hard. Health care providers may be homophobic or they may not know much about your health concerns. This can make it tough to come out to your health care provider, and some women may just avoid seeking health care altogether. But it is important to get regular check-ups and to get professional help when something is wrong. Here are some suggestions to improve the quality of your health care:

- ✦ Ask LGBTT friends about their health care providers, or check local queer newspapers and community directories for advice.
- ✦ Visit potential providers and ask questions about their training and experience with LGBTT health issues.
- ✦ Check out the office space and look for lesbian-friendly posters, brochures, magazines or other signs of a LGBTT-positive environment.
- ✦ Listen for how the provider talks with you and whether you are encouraged to talk about your concerns in a culturally sensitive and nonjudgmental manner.
- ✦ If you feel safe, come out to your provider so that you can be open about discussing the issues that are of concern to you and your provider can better understand how to help you stay healthy or get better.
- ✦ If you do not feel comfortable with a provider, shop around to find a place where you can be yourself so that you can get the best health care possible.

Toronto Resources

Canadian Cancer Society

Cancer Info Service • 1-888-939-3333
Smokers' Helpline • 1-877-513-5333
www.cancer.ca

David Kelley Lesbian and Gay Community Counselling Program

Counselling and partner abuse response services.
416-595-9618

Hassle Free Clinic

Sexual health medical and counselling services.
416-922-0566 • www.hasslefreeclinic.org

Rainbow Services at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

Counselling for drug and alcohol concerns.
416-535-8501 ext.6781

Sherbourne Health Centre

LGBTT medical and wellness care, counselling, workshops, group support and Supporting Our Youth programs for LGBTT youth.
416-324-4180 • www.sherbourne.on.ca

Internet Resources

Lesbian Health Research Centre

www.lesbianhealthinfo.org/

LesbianSTD

www.lesbianstd.com

Canadian Rainbow Health Coalition

www.rainbowhealth.ca

LGBT Health Channel

www.gayhealthchannel.com

GLBT Health

www.metrokc.gov/health/glbt/

Let's Talk About Lesbian Health

Health information for lesbians and women who have sex with women.



SHERBOURNE
Health Centre

Produced by **Sherbourne Health Centre** with support from **The Rotary Club of Toronto.**

Lesbians and women who have sex with women have many of the same health needs as other women, but cultural differences and the impact of homophobia mean that you may experience these health needs differently. There are also some specific health issues that may be more likely to affect you. It is important that both you and your health care provider are aware of your health care needs. This brochure outlines some of the health issues that are of concern to lesbians.

HEART HEALTH

Heart disease is the major cause of death among Canadian women, accounting for 34% of all female deaths in 2002. The factors that can increase a woman's risk for heart disease include smoking, alcohol use, being overweight and stress, all of which seem to be more prevalent among lesbians compared to straight women. To reduce your risk, have an annual clinical exam so that your blood pressure and cholesterol levels can be checked. Try to stay physically active, quit smoking, eat well and maintain a healthy weight.

ALCOHOL & DRUG USE

While the debate has raged since the seventies, there is some evidence that lesbians are more likely to use alcohol and other drugs compared to heterosexual women. Lesbians are also more likely to report experiencing problems from alcohol use and to continue to drink as they age. In queer communities, alcohol or drugs may be used to cope with discrimination and internalized homophobia, and lesbian and gay bars often provide the only comfortable space to meet other women. If you use drugs, learning about them can help make your use safer. If you're concerned about your drug or alcohol use, ask yourself whether it is affecting your health, relationships, job or finances. Also, consider whether your use is leading you to take risks, sexual or otherwise, that you wouldn't take if you were sober. There are many types of alcohol and drug programs and your health care provider can help you choose one that's right for you.

PARTNER ABUSE

Abuse can happen in any relationship but abuse between women is often misunderstood or trivialized. Abuse can take many forms and it is an attempt by one partner to gain power and control over the other. Sometimes it is difficult to recognize, but it might involve such behaviours as hitting, forcing sexual acts, name-calling, threats and controlling finances. While limited services exist, abused lesbians can seek help and support by talking with family, friends or a counsellor. Women who are abusive can seek professional help by talking with their health care provider or a counsellor.

TOBACCO & SMOKING

What little research has been done indicates that lesbians smoke at much higher rates than straight women. In 2004, 20% of adults over 15 in Canada were current smokers while estimates for lesbians range from 30-50%. Lesbians are also more likely to be heavy smokers. Several factors contribute to these higher rates including high levels of social stress, frequent socializing in bars, higher rates of alcohol and drug use and targeted promotions by the tobacco industry. Lesbian youth are even more likely to smoke than heterosexual teenagers, and are at increased risk for developing cancers, heart disease, and emphysema. While quitting smoking is not easy, there are programs and resources to help you be successful.

CANCER

Negative experiences with the healthcare system lead many lesbians to avoid regular physical exams and routine screening tests. This puts lesbians at a higher risk of late diagnosis and treatment of any type of cancer. Breast cancer risk may be increased by higher body weights and alcohol consumption, and the greater likelihood of either having no biological children or having children after age 30. Lesbians' risk for ovarian cancer may be elevated because they are less likely than heterosexual women to have ever used oral contraceptives and more likely to have never given birth or breastfed. Higher rates of smoking cigarettes increase the risk for lung cancer and also add to the risk for other cancers. It is important for you to assess your personal risk factors and to have routine breast exams and mammograms. Pap smears which screen for cervical cancer are also necessary, even for women who do not have sex with men.

EMOTIONAL & MENTAL HEALTH

There are many reasons why people may develop emotional or psychological problems during their lives, but lesbians face particular challenges living in a homophobic and heterosexist world. Negative attitudes, discrimination and violence can contribute to mental and emotional distress for lesbians. Coming out can be emotionally tough with many women having to deal with rejection from family and friends. Staying in the closet can also be stressful with the fear of discovery leading to isolation for some women. These stressors have a profound impact on lesbians' self-esteem and self-identities, and studies show that lesbians suffer from depression, anxiety and suicide at higher rates than heterosexual women. If you feel depressed, try to find support to cope with the stress in your life. You might want to talk to family and friends or with a counsellor or others in a support group. Meditation, exercise and making time for things you enjoy may also be helpful.

NUTRITION, FITNESS & WEIGHT

From a health perspective, nutrition and weight can be difficult issues to talk about in lesbian communities. Cultural norms may encourage acceptance of heavier body weights and the rejection of dieting and thinness as a desirable standard. Bodies of all shapes and sizes are embraced and being physically active is common. Previous studies have shown that in addition to being less concerned about their weight, lesbians are also less likely to perceive themselves as overweight. But on average, lesbians are more likely to be overweight than heterosexual women, which can put them at greater risk for heart disease and stroke as well as some other health conditions. In contrast, cultural pressures to be thin lead some women to compulsive exercising and eating disorders. While there's nothing wrong with wanting to look good or having a healthy body image, nutrition and weight concerns can become unhealthy if they make you feel depressed or cause physical harm. Try to educate yourself about good nutrition and develop a program of regular exercise that includes breaks and fun activities.

SEXUAL HEALTH

Although women who have sex only with women are thought to be at lower risk for contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs), some risks do exist. While HIV, chlamydia and gonorrhea are rarely transmitted, STIs such as herpes, HPV (genital wart virus) and trichomoniasis are transmitted fairly easily between women during sex. Lesbians who have partners of another sex also need to consider the risks of transmission of HIV and other STIs, as well as the risk of unplanned pregnancy. To reduce your risk and to protect your partners, get tested regularly for sexually transmitted infections, and use latex barriers like condoms and gloves with lube. Take care of your sex toys by using condoms and cleaning them before sharing with your partner(s). To reduce your risk of unplanned pregnancy, use condoms or another birth control method.