

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.

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.

For women under 40 years, regular screening is not recommended unless there is a family history of breast cancer, or that 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 Queensland Health. To book an appointment, visit www.health.qld.gov.au/breastscreen or ask your local GP for more information.

Finding the right health practitioner

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

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

Remember that support for your breasts doesn't only come in the form of a bra! Make sure you remain vigilant in conducting regular self-examinations and mammograms if they apply to you.

Ask your GP for any advice and act promptly if you think there is something wrong. It is always better to be safe than sorry.

For more information

- Family Planning QLD
(07) 3250 0240
Clinic locations throughout QLD go to www.fpq.com.au
- Women's Health Queensland Wide – Health Information Line
(07) 3839 9988
1800 017 676 (toll free outside Brisbane)
www.womhealth.org.au
- BreastScreen Queensland Program
www.health.qld.gov.au/breastscreen
- National Breast Cancer Centre
www.nbcc.org.au
- Queensland Association for Healthy Communities
www.qahc.org.au/lesbian

DISCLAIMER

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Supporting your Breast Friends

Breast Cancer Awareness for Lesbians



Lesbian Health Action Group



HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

Breast cancer is the most common cancer amongst Australian women (excluding skin and melanoma cancers), accounting for more than a quarter of new cancers diagnosed every year.

More than 70% of all breast cancer occurs in women aged 50 years and over, however that does not mean that young women are spared from the disease as breast cancer can develop at any age.

Risk factors for developing breast cancer include;

- Getting older (1 in 11 women will be affected by age 75 and 1 in 8 by age 85)
- Having a strong family history of breast cancer
- Having previously been diagnosed with breast cancer or Ductal Carcinoma In Situ (DCIS)
- Drinking more than 2 standard drinks a day
- Not breast feeding
- Starting menstruation early (before 12)
- Starting menopause late (after 55)
- Taking combined Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) after menopause, especially for 5 years or longer
- Gaining weight in adulthood, especially after menopause.

Breast cancer in Lesbians

Lifestyle factors and the effect that sexuality has on addressing health needs and the access of services all play a role in the difference between health outcomes for lesbians and heterosexual women.

Lesbians are 2-3 times more likely to develop breast cancer than their heterosexual counterparts, linked to the higher prevalence of risk factors related to breast cancer.

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.

All these risk factors correlate with the general risk factors for women, making lesbians more likely to be at risk of developing breast cancer.

Lesbians also access health services less frequently than members of the general community. They are less likely to go for mammograms and perform self-examinations than heterosexual women. This may be reflective of the increased incidence of breast cancer in lesbians due to low rates of preventative screening or later presentation of symptoms.

Protecting yourself

You can protect yourself from breast cancer by lowering or eradicating those risk factors by keeping yourself healthy and making adjustments to your current lifestyle.

Lowering your chances of breast cancer can be as simple as:

- Cutting alcohol consumption to two drinks or less a day
- Exercising regularly
- Increasing your consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables, avoiding or reducing your intake of food high in saturated and animal fat.
- Maintaining a healthy body weight.

Checking your Breasts!

There is no need to be embarrassed about checking your breasts. The process of self-examination takes less than five minutes and may potentially save your life.

When conducting a self-exam, make sure you check for changes in:

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

Note that most lumps are not cancers. However any new lump that does not go away after 3-4 weeks should be examined by your GP. You should also report any persistent pain, especially if it is in one breast.

Hint: Who says you have to check on your breasts yourself? Breast checking can be sexy if done with a partner, but be careful not to get sidetracked! For the duration of the exam, keep your hands above her waist!

How do I check for lumps?

So you can recognize the normal size and shape of your breasts, stand in front of a mirror and look at your breasts with:

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

Afterwards, lie down with a pillow under your left shoulder and:

- 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.

Remember to 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. You can however, reduce the likelihood of developing breast cancer and increase the chances of recovery, especially if the cancer is detected early.

To screen your breasts, you will need to go in for a mammogram, which are essentially x-rays of the breasts. Mammograms look for signs of breast cancer and investigate changes in the breasts, as well as detecting smaller tumours that cannot be felt by self-examination.

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.