



**What can
lesbians
catch?
Other than
a beautiful
woman?**



Lesbian Health
Action Group



HEALTHY
COMMUNITIES



All sexually active women are at risk of catching a sexually transmitted infection (STI), including women who have sex with women (WSW). Lesbians are more likely to catch certain types of infections than others; however viruses and bacteria rarely discriminate. They, like our sexual practices, only have preferences.

How are STI's transmitted?

It's easy to get lost in the throes of pleasure and ignore the importance of having safer sex, which can result in a partner catching something nasty and unwanted. Most infections are transmitted through bodily fluids such as blood and vaginal discharge; most of which are likely to be exchanged while having sex, especially if you do so with cuts or wounds on your fingers, genitals or mouth.

You are more susceptible to being infected if you are:

- Having sex with a woman who has an infection
- Having sex while menstruating
- Having sex while having open lesions or sores that aren't covered
- Sharing sex toys with a partner without using a condom or washing the toys between each partner's use
- Changing sexual partners.

How do I know I am infected?

The tricky thing about these infections is that someone can have them without knowing and so a person can be infectious, without knowing that they have become infected. The only way to find out about some STIs is to get a check-up, especially if you have had unprotected sex with a partner whose sexual history is unknown to you.

Getting tested is all about prevention and means that you will be able to access appropriate treatment to reduce the risk of complications and prevent the passing on of the infection to others.

Following is a list of potentially transmissible STIs between women and their symptoms, however note again that several of these infections show little or no symptoms. Just because you don't show any signs of an infection after a rough night of passion, does not mean you are completely in the clear.

What can I catch?

Contrary to popular belief, it is just as easy to catch an infection as it is to catch a beautiful woman. In fact you may end up with both, which is usually not a very desired outcome. Listed are the STIs you can catch and their symptoms; however do note that several of these infections show little or no symptoms. Just because you don't show any signs of an infection after a night of passion, does not mean you are completely in the clear.

Bacterial Vaginosis (BV)

Caused by an imbalance of good and bad bacteria in the vagina. Transmission is not completely clear, however is common amongst women who have sex with women.

Symptoms include:

- Itching or irritation around the genitals
- Excessive, thin or grey sticky vaginal discharge
- Characteristic fishy or musty odour.

Treatment is a round or a large dose of antibiotics.

Candidiasis (Thrush)

Also known as yeast infections, are caused by an overgrowth of a type of yeast known as Candida.

Symptoms include:

- Itching and irritation around the genitals
- Pain while urinating
- Sticky, thick and mucous-like white discharge.

Treatment is a round or a large dose of antibiotics.

Herpes (Oral and Genital)

Caused by the Herpes Simplex Virus (HSV-1 for Oral, HSV-2 for Genital). This STI is notorious for not showing symptoms of infection. An infected person carries the virus in most bodily fluids, making the spread of herpes incredibly easy, especially during acts of intimacy where those fluids are more likely to be exchanged. It is one of the most common infections in both men and women, largely due to how easy it is spread through sexual partners.

Although there are symptoms of infection, the virus can lay dormant within a person's body for months (even years) without causing any physical ailments.

Symptoms of oral herpes include:

- Cold sores around the mouth
- Flu-like symptoms (sore throat, headaches, fever, swollen neck glands)
- Sores appearing on broken skin around the body where the virus has entered
- Sores around the genitals from oral sex with a person carrying the virus.

Symptoms of genital herpes include:

- Painful, ulcerating blisters or sores around the genitals
- Flu-like symptoms (sore throat, headaches, fever, swollen neck glands)
- Small cracks in the skin with or without an itch or tingling.
- Swelling and pain in the genital area
- Painful urination.

Herpes is unfortunately incurable and an infected person will continue to carry and shed the virus during the course of their lifetime. Symptoms will flare up and subside as episodes occur and will be varied in their incidence. However, your GP will provide you with medication to reduce the severity of symptoms and frequency of occurrences.

Genital HPV

Caused by various strands of the human papillomavirus, HPV is linked to causes of genital warts and cervical cancer. It is extremely common, with 4 out of 5 people having it at some point in their lives. Not many women know that they carry the virus until it progresses to warts or cancer.

HPV can be detected with regular pap smears at your GP. For more information, please refer to our Cervical Cancer and Pap Smear factsheet.

Chlamydia and Gonorrhoea

Less common in lesbians, however both can be transmitted through penetrative sex through toys and fingers if one partner carries the infection.

Symptoms are rare, however include:

- Painful sex and urination
- Increased vaginal discharge
- Spotting or bleeding when you're not on your period.

Both Chlamydia and Gonorrhoea can be treated easily with a course of antibiotics, however can only be detected through testing.

It is important to get tested if you suspect you have either infection, as leaving the infection untreated can lead to more serious complications such as pelvic inflammatory disease and infertility.

Syphilis

Syphilis is a devastating disease if left untreated. There are three stages of syphilis, each with differing symptoms, however not all women will show signs of infection at each stage. It is transmitted very easily between women through all types of sexual activity and a person is infectious at almost every stage of the infection.

Primary Syphilis (1st Stage)



- Characterised by a painless sore called a chancre, usually on the area of body where the infection has been transmitted
- Due to the sore being painless, it is often overlooked or seen as something else
- It will disappear within a few weeks, however if untreated, the infection will progress to the second stage.

Secondary Syphilis (2nd Stage)



- Characterised by the appearance of a non-itchy rash around the body, most common around the palms of hands or soles of feet
- Tiredness and frequent headaches
- Swollen glands
- Weight and hair loss.

This stage can last for a few months and the symptoms may eventually disappear altogether and you may be symptom-free for years or even decades. However the infection is still in your body and if left untreated, there is a risk the infection will progress onto its deadliest stage.

Tertiary Syphilis (3rd Stage)

The syphilis infection can go on to cause damage to major organs such as the heart or nervous system. As it progresses, severe complications can arise depending on which part of the body the infection is affecting, resulting in any one of these symptoms:

- Stroke
- Numbness
- Loss of co-ordination
- Vision and hearing impairments
- Heart disease
- Aneurysms
- Appearance of tumours on internal and external organs.

Late stage syphilis can eventually lead to death, so getting the infection detected and treated early is essential. All it takes to avoid these symptoms are a course of antibiotic injections or tablets.

Pubic Lice (Crabs)



Characterised by tiny insects which live amongst pubic hair, transmitted through intimate contact via an infected partner. Lesbians are particularly susceptible to contracting lice, especially when engaging in acts such as tribadism.

Symptoms include:

- Noticing the appearance of lice around your genitals or amongst your pubic hair
- Mild to severe itching.

Treatment consists of the application of medicated shampoo and the washing of bed sheets and clothing in hot water. If you suspect you have lice, make sure treatment is extended to your partner/s as well.

Trichomoniasis

Commonly known as “trich”. Is caused by a parasite and commonly infects the lower half of a woman’s genital tract. Transmission amongst women who have sex with women is common and symptoms include:

- Foamy discharge which may be yellow or green
- An unpleasant, fishy odour
- Itching
- Painful urination.

It only takes a swab to identify infection and a course of antibiotics to get rid of. Your partner/s should be treated as well. Reoccurrence within 3 months of treatment is common.



Catching the woman and **ONLY** the woman

The best way to avoid catching an STI is to practice safer sex using protection. By protection, we not only mean physical barriers such as dental dams or gloves, but also precautionary actions that you can take to minimise the transmission of infections during sex.

These actions include:

- Washing your hands and cutting your fingernails to minimise the risk of scratching and transmitting nasty infections to your partner during penetration
- Having regular pap smears and sexual health checks
- Being honest with your partner about your sexual health history
- Being aware of your actions during sexual activity (e.g. be sober enough to practice safer sex!)
- Having sex when you're the least infectious if you know you carry an STI virus and making sure you use latex barriers when doing so
- Avoiding sex during your period or using latex barriers when if you decide to do so
- Washing your sex toys and using a condom with them
- Stocking your cupboard with gloves and condoms!

Dental Dams? What are they?

Dental dams are an A5 sheet of latex you place over your partner's genitals to avoid coming into contact with her vaginal fluids. Unlike condoms, you won't find them on the shelves of your local grocery store. However, dental dams can be fashioned easily from a glove and a pair of scissors.

Follow these simple instructions:

- 1** Cut 4 fingers off the glove, leaving the thumb in place
- 2** Slit up the side opposite to the thumb
- 3** Rinse talcum off the glove
- 4** Put some water-based lubricant on the side with the thumb protruding
- 5** Place the lubricated side on your partner's vulva
- 6** Hold the glove in place with both hands, or have your partner hold it covering her labia
- 7** Use your tongue to stimulate your partner. Insert your tongue into the thumb for extra fun!
- 8** After sex, be sure to dispose of the glove safely and wash your hands.

Note that you should never share the same dam!

If you experience sensitivity to latex, find non-latex gloves from your chemist or grocery store. Lube is used for the extra sensation and that slippery feeling, reduces the risk of abrasions and cuts out the opportunity for bugs that cause infections to move into the blood system. It also reduces the risk of the latex breaking and avoids the awkwardness that comes with needing to make a new dam.

Many women will choose not to use gloves or a dam for sex, however this is only recommended if you know that you and your partner are clear from STIs.

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 experienced in working with LGBT clients
- Look in the LGBT press for advertisements for health services.

Have regular sexual health checks and don't be afraid to see your GP for testing. The most it will take is a swab, a bit of blood or a short exam to find out if there is anything wrong. It will save you from misery in the future and not to mention, leave more time for you and your partner to get it on!

Remember to only catch the woman and only the woman, because infections are never welcome in the bedroom!



For more information

Family Planning QLD

(07) 3250 0240

Clinic locations throughout QLD

www.fpq.com.au

Women's Health Queensland Wide Health Information Line

(07) 3839 9988 or

1800 017 676 (toll free)

www.womhealth.org.au

Queensland Health: Sexual Health Line

(07) 3240 0240

www.health.qld.gov.au/sexhealth

Queensland Association for Healthy Communities

www.qahc.org.au/lesbian

The Lesbian Health Action Group would like to acknowledge the following sources of information. To read more go to:

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