



Woman to Woman

Tips for Healthy Living for Women Who Have Sex with Women

Health includes not only physical but also social, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

This brochure outlines tips for healthy living for any woman who has sex with women—no matter how you identify—lesbian, gay, bisexual, straight, queer, or anything else. This brochure will help you recognize important health issues to consider if you are a woman who has sex with other women (WSW).

Accepting Yourself

Learning to explore and accept yourself can help you stay socially, intellectually, mentally, emotionally, sexually, spiritually, and physically healthy.

Regardless of a person's physical appearance or sexual orientation, everyone has a gender identity and gender expression.

Gender identity is one's internal sense of self. This could mean someone is masculine, feminine, neither, or some combination that may or may not conform to societal expectations. Because it is internal, gender identity is not necessarily outwardly apparent.

Gender expression, however, is one's outward presentation of gender, often demonstrated by dress, mannerisms, hair, and/or speech, and may not correspond with a person's gender identity. Gender identity and sexual orientation are two different concepts that often get intertwined. **Sexual orientation** describes to whom a person is attracted sexually, emotionally, and/or romantically. Orientation is not dependent upon sexual experience, but rather on a person's feelings and attractions. Some people may choose to identify their sexual orientation through other terms.

Some women may identify as heterosexual (or attracted to the opposite sex) yet engage in sexual activity with women. This is not to say that these women are confused or deny their sexual orientation. Engaging in sexual activity with a person of the same sex does not mean that a woman must identify as gay, lesbian, queer, or bisexual. Not all people choose to identify their sexual orientation. Many reasons exist for this choice. Some individuals may not feel comfortable with all aspects of a definition; other people may find that using a particular label is too restrictive.

Many people experience prejudices as a result of identifying with a particular group. These prejudices can make it difficult to figure out how to label yourself, particularly if you discover unfamiliar feelings or want to modify your current identification.

Coming Out: A Lifelong Process

Coming out is the process of acknowledging, accepting, and appreciating your sexual orientation or gender identity and often includes the voluntary act of informing others. Choosing not to conceal your sexual orientation or gender identity is a deeply personal decision that you will continue to make daily as you meet new people and as you decide what is safe and feels right for you.



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Coming out to yourself and others can be beneficial. Living an open and authentic life can enhance self-esteem and reduce stress. You may find yourself developing genuine relationships that are closer, stronger, richer, and more fulfilling because they are based on trust and honest disclosure. The very act of living openly is courageous, and coming out may help you connect and engage with vibrant communities.

The benefits of coming out can outweigh the risks, but it is ultimately up to you to determine whether or not it is necessary or safe to do so in your current situation. Consider your health and well-being as you think about how, where, and when you will choose to come out to someone. Realize that many people in your life will be accepting and understanding, but some may react differently. Just as it may have taken you some time to adjust, it may take others some time as well.

As you decide whether or not to come out to larger social, cultural, and spiritual groups, weigh the benefits against the risks. As you embark on this journey of self-discovery and disclosure, remember that you are not alone. Consider the multiple facets of your individual identity and try to find places that are supportive of you as a whole person. Find a network of people who value each and every aspect of your cultural, spiritual, and social experiences. (See "Resources" listed at the end of this brochure.)

Finding Your Community

Having a network of diverse people who support your individual identity and your overall well-being is beneficial to your social, emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being. Having a community of caring and affirming people can help you to feel strong, healthy, and joyful. You may find a LGBTQ+ resource center or group on campus or in the local community that can help you connect with others who share your beliefs and values.

Finding a healthy and supportive personal community can feel overwhelming if you do not know where to look. The following places on and around campus may be helpful as you find and select your own version of community:

- LGBTQ+ centers
- Women's centers
- Diversity centers
- Multicultural student services
- Health centers
- Counseling centers
- Health promotion offices
- Faith-based organizations that support individuals of all sexual orientations and gender identities
- Student involvement offices
- Student clubs and organizations
- Local chapters of national organizations for LGBTQ+ individuals and their allies

See the "Resources" section for more specific organizations that may help you build a supportive community.

Challenges in the Health Care System

Women who have sex with women may face unique challenges within the health care system. Some health and wellness professionals have not had specific training about health issues that affect women who have sex with women. Additional barriers to obtaining health care may include:

- Fear of negative reactions from health and wellness professionals if sexual orientation, gender identity, or sexual behaviors are disclosed
- Health and wellness professionals' lack of understanding of health issues that are of special concern for women who have sex with women
- A perception that women who have sex with women have lower risks for health issues that are typically addressed during annual health exams
- Lack of benefits, including health insurance, for same-sex partners

All of these issues have the potential to reduce the effectiveness of health care for women who have sex with women, but you can empower yourself to make informed health decisions and access high-quality health and wellness services.

Finding a Health or Wellness Professional with Whom You Feel Safe

In order to stay healthy, it is important to have access to health and wellness professionals with whom you can be honest. Some health and wellness professionals are knowledgeable about issues affecting women who have sex with women, but you must know where to find a provider who makes you feel comfortable.

Many women who have sex with women start by asking for referrals from friends or local LGBTQ+ resource centers or groups. If you do not have access to people who can provide referrals, look online for places to seek care. (See "Resources" at the end of this brochure.)

You might want to investigate which facilities and/or providers are best able to your needs. You may have different experiences with a range of places, providers, and visits. Consider the following questions:

- Is there a posted non-discrimination policy that includes gender identity and expression and sexual orientation?
- Is there LGBTQ+ inclusive information represented in posters, brochures, magazines, and/or symbols in the facility and on the website?
- Do the patient forms assume the gender of your sex partners, or do the forms allow you to self-identify the gender of your partners?
- How is patient confidentiality assured?
- Do the people you meet with use inclusive language that you are comfortable with, or do they make offensive jokes or comments about LGBTQ+ people?

After a visit with a new provider, ask yourself:

- Did the health or wellness professional make assumptions about you and your sexual health?
- Did you feel safe disclosing your medical history and personal life?
- Were your concerns and questions addressed in a sensitive manner?

The health or wellness professional and facility should provide a welcoming, safe space where you feel comfortable seeking care.

If you did not like the place you went or the person you saw, consider expressing your concerns to the office, and then keep looking. You deserve quality, empowering health and wellness services.

Issues that May Affect Women Who Have Sex with Women

Research suggests that women who have sex with women are at a higher risk for:

Stress, depression, and anxiety: Hearing and believing myths about homosexuality and bisexuality can damage one's self-esteem and cause additional stress. The discrimination, legal issues, and lack of cultural acceptance that women who have sex with women sometimes face can increase susceptibility to stress, depression, and anxiety. Chronic stress can affect eating and sleeping habits, increase feelings of depression, or make you more likely to use/abuse alcohol or other drugs, which could lead to other health problems.

Substance use: Lesbians, bisexuals, and other women who have sex with women may face an increased risk for alcohol, tobacco, and other drug abuse. Stress, low self-esteem, and a culture that favors people who are heterosexual can trigger this risk.

Breast cancer and cervical cancer: Lesbian and bisexual women may not feel at ease going to health professionals and are less likely to use birth control. Therefore, they are less likely to obtain annual gynecological check-ups, which include clinical breast exams, STI testing, Pap tests, and annual sexual health screenings, and are less likely to find cancers early and at stages that are easiest to treat.

Violence: Women who have sex with women experience physical harm, sexual assault, and other forms of violence/abuse from acquaintances, strangers, or even their partners, just as heterosexual women do. Possible forms of violence or abuse women who have sex with women may experience include humiliation, being "outed" (or being threatened to be "outed") by a partner to friends and family, isolation, and manipulation. Lesbian and bisexual women are just as vulnerable to relationship violence as heterosexual women, but they may have more barriers to seeking supportive services, especially if they are closeted.

If something happens to you, tell someone.

As soon as you can, contact a friend, LGBTQ+ hotline, crisis hotline, or campus staff person you trust. Talking with someone else can help you begin to think about next steps towards safety and healing.

Ways to Keep Yourself Healthy

- Find support from friends, family, and/or a counselor to help create a healthy environment for yourself.
- Seek regular (at least annually) health screenings, such as a gynecological exam, STI tests, breast exam, and support from health services on campus or in the community.
- Identify resources that are sensitive to the unique health issues for women who have sex with other women.
- Seek help if you want to quit smoking, work through a substance use problem, or decide to leave an abusive relationship.

- Examine your nutritional health; make changes that support healthy eating and maintaining a healthy weight.
- Engage in regular physical activity—anything from walking more often to getting into an exercise program at the gym.
- Identify social events that do not center around drinking, smoking, or other drugs.
- Find healthy ways to manage stress in your life, such as meditation, deep breathing, and exercise.

Practicing Safer Sex

Abstinence is the only way to protect yourself completely from sexually transmitted infections (STIs); however, you can reduce your risk for many STIs by practicing safer sex.

Discussing sexual history: Talk to your partner(s). Open, honest communication is an important aspect of being sexually healthy. Many women who have sex with women may have had other partners who are female or male. Talk to your partner(s) about your sexual boundaries, past STI (including HIV) exposure, and safer sex practices, including any history of STI testing.

Reducing the number of partners: One way to reduce your risk of acquiring STIs is limiting the number of partners you have across your lifetime. Mutual monogamy (having sex with only one person, who has sex with only you) is another way to reduce the risk for STIs, particularly when both partners have been tested for STIs before initiating any type of sexual activity.

Identifying risks for STIs: STI risk depends on specific behaviors, past sexual history, and the number of sex partners one has during a lifetime. Regardless of how a woman identifies, it is important to share sexual history information with a health professional. Some STIs are passed through body fluids (blood, vaginal secretions, semen, and breast milk) and some are passed through skin-to-skin contact. STIs can also be transmitted through oral sex and the use of sex toys.

Get vaccinated: All women should talk with their health professionals about vaccinations. It is just as important for women

who have sex with women as it is for heterosexual women to be vaccinated. The hepatitis A and B vaccines are recommended for women who have sex with women. Vaccines that prevent human papillomavirus (HPV), the virus that causes cervical, vulvar, and anal cancers and genital warts, are also available. The vaccines offer protection against only specific HPV types, and you should talk with your health care provider to determine which vaccine is best for you.

Know your status: Many STIs display no signs or symptoms. Seeking regular sexual health screenings such as annual examinations, Pap tests at the recommended intervals, and testing for STIs (including HIV) is important and can empower you to practice safer sex and stay healthy.

Use safer sex supplies: There are many safer sex supplies that can help reduce your risk of STI transmission.

- **Latex or polyurethane dams:** A dam is a thin sheet of latex or polyurethane that is placed over the vulva or anus during oral sex. (You may have to ask your partner to help hold it in place.) A new oral dam should be used with every partner, every body part, and every time you engage in oral sex. You can use water- or silicone-based lubricant with a dam to increase pleasure. If you do not have a dam available, you can cut a condom across the top and along one side to create a dam or use a sheet of plastic wrap (non-microwavable). Plastic wrap is also a great alternative for people who have latex allergies.
- **Gloves:** If you are using hands and fingers for stimulation or penetration (i.e., masturbation, fisting, etc.), you can wear latex or nitrile gloves. Use a new glove for each partner or orifice and turn the glove inside out before you throw it away.
- **Condoms:** Latex or polyurethane condoms can be used for vaginal and anal sex (penis-in-vagina or anus or toy-in-vagina or anus) and oral sex (mouth-to-genitals). Use a new condom with each partner and any time a penis or toy changes locations (e.g., vagina to anus). Flavored condoms can make oral

Safer Sex Supplies

Barrier

Latex dam (If you do not have a latex dam, cut a latex condom or glove to create a rectangular piece of latex or use a piece of non-microwaveable plastic wrap)

Latex glove with water- or silicone-based lubricant

Latex condom with water- or silicone-based lubricant

Non-lubricated latex condom with added water-based lubricant

Flavored or non-lubricated condom

Polyurethane or polyisoprene condom, dam, plastic wrap, or non-latex glove with lubricant

When to Use

Oral sex on a woman

Oral-anal sexual contact (rimming)

Finger or hand penetration of vagina or anus

When sharing a non-silicone sex toy

Vaginal sex

Anal sex

When sharing a silicone sex toy

Oral sex on a man

If either partner is allergic to latex or does not like the way latex feels

sex more enjoyable. Do not use silicone-based lubricants with silicone sex toys. Some condoms are lubricated with silicone-based lubricant, so it is best to use a non-lubricated condom and add water-based lubricant with silicone sex toys.

- **Lubricant:** Water-based lubricant is safe to use with toys, condoms, dams, and gloves. Never use petroleum jelly or

oil-based lube during sex—they will cause latex condoms to break. Do not use silicone-based lubricants with silicone sex toys.

- **Clean sex toys:** Sex toys (dildos, vibrators, anal toys, etc.) should be cleaned with mild soap and water after each use.

Resources

Hotlines

CDC STD Information

(800) CDC-INFO | (800) 232-4636 (in English, en Español)
TTY: (888) 232-6348
www.cdc.gov/std

Fenway Health

LGBT Helpline (25+): (888) 340-4528
Peer Listening Line (25 & Under): (800) 399-PEER
www.fenwayhealth.org

GLBT National Help Center

LGBT National Youth Talkline (teens and young adults up to age 25): (800) 246-7743
LGBT National Talkline (all ages): (888) 843-4564
Online Peer-Support Chat: www.glbthotline.org/peer-chat.html
www.glbthotline.org

Anti-Violence Project—a 24/7 hotline for those who have witnessed or experienced violence
(212) 714-1141 (in English, en Español)
www.avp.org

The Trevor Helpline—a 24-hour suicide hotline for gay youth
(866) 488-7386

Online chat and text support:
www.thetrevorproject.org/get-help-now

Referral Directories

Gay and Lesbian Medical Association (GLMA)

Find a health care provider:
www.glma.org/referrals

Center Link: The Community of LGBT Centers

Find an LGBTQ+ community center:
www.lgbtcenters.org/LGBTCenters

Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals

Find an LGBTQ+ center on campus:
www.lgbtcampus.org/find-an-lgbtqa-campus-center

Health Information

CDC LGBT Health

www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/index.htm

Support Resources

PFLAG

www.pflag.org

Advocates for Youth

advocatesforyouth.org

American College Health Association

(410) 859-1500 | www.acha.org

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