Lesbians’ health: myths and realities

The right to health is recognised in numerous international and regional treaties as a fundamental part of human rights. Many countries around the world have included the right to health in their constitution. This means that governments must create the conditions so that every citizen can enjoy the best state of health possible.

Health is not immune to some myths; and when the health of lesbians* is concerned, we are confronted with many stereotypes linked to sexual orientation and gender that can have adverse consequences on the health of lesbians. Unfortunately, due to the lack of information and public awareness campaigns, some false beliefs and prejudices are driven by lesbians themselves, as well as by health care professionals.

Though some misconceptions and stereotypes also apply to women’s health and to homosexuality in general, we have decided here to focus specifically on those related to lesbians’ health.

Three double-sided sheets focusing on the “myths and realities” surrounding lesbians’ health have been produced. The themes tackled are Breast and Cervical Cancers, HIV and Sexually Transmitted Infections, and Well-Being. The illustrations reflect the content of the texts. Those sheets can also be used individually and are available in French, Dutch and English.

The information contained in the sheets aim to:
• Improve the health of lesbians
• Demystify myths and stereotypes on certain aspects of lesbian’s health
• Enable lesbians to be more autonomous and assertive about their health, and in their contact with health professionals.

A quiz on myths related to lesbians’ health will enable you to play with your friends and test your knowledge. The quiz can also be used for raising awareness in trainings and workshops.

Feel free to share and disseminate the information, we count on you to demystify those myths!

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* By “lesbian”, we mean any woman who is attracted to other women and who identifies as lesbian, bisexual, butch, fem, androgyn, dyke, queer, or who does not feel represented by any of these categories. We decided to use the term “lesbian” because it is the most widespread, even if some individuals do not identify as such.
Quizz
Contribute to demystify some myths, play with us!

1 • Lesbians need regular gynecological checkups
   True  False

2 • Lesbians are at higher risk of breast cancer than heterosexual women
   True  False

3 • Sexual relations between women do not present any risk of transmitting HIV
   True  False

4 • Lesbians are immune from sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
   True  False

5 • Lesbians who dress in a feminine way aren’t “real” lesbians
   True  False

6 • A loving relationship between women is less serious than a heterosexual one
   True  False

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1 • True
Lesbians have a tendency to consult their gynecologists less often than heterosexual women, as gynecological visits are associated with contraception and pregnancy. This medical test allows the detection of STIs and certain cancers like breast cancer and cervical cancer. That is why gynecological tests are essential for all women, of all ages, whatever their sexual orientation.

For more information, see the sheet on Breast and Cervical Cancers.

2 • Probably true...
In addition to the risk factors common to all women, the overconsumption of alcohol and consumption of tobacco in relation to heterosexual women and the fact of not having children expose certain lesbians to a higher risk of breast cancer. Even if scientific studies are too scarce to be definitive, it is likely that the risk of breast cancer for lesbians would be overall higher than the average of heterosexual women.

For more information, see the sheet on Breast and Cervical Cancers.

3 • False
The risk of transmission of HIV between women is weak - but not inexistent. Several cases of sexual transmission of HIV between women have been identified (even though research on this specific issue is rare). Some sexual practices between women expose them to a risk of HIV contamination.

For more information, see the sheet on HIV and STIs.

4 • False
Lesbians have a sexuality that is as varied as the one of heterosexual people. They can have sexual behaviors at risk of STIs with women or men. The risk of transmission of STIs is, therefore, real.

For more information, see the sheet on HIV and STIs.

5 • False
Lesbians have styles and identities that are as diverse as heterosexual individuals. The masculine and feminine models that society proposes do not accord with the diversity of human beings, whatever their sexual orientation may be.

For more information, see the sheet on Well-Being.

6 • False
A relationship between women can sometimes be considered by society as being less serious and not lasting. Love does not know sexual orientation. When one loves, the feelings have the same intensity whether one is homosexual or heterosexual.

Being accepted as a couple, especially by friends and family, contributes to self-esteem.

For more information, see sheet on Well-Being.

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The quiz was inspired by the Swiss organization Santé plurielle.
www.sante-plurielle.ch
Breast Cancers & Cervical Cancers

### Myths vs. Realities

**Myths**
- Lesbians do not need to have regular gynecological exams
- Cervical cancer concerns only heterosexual women, particularly in developing countries

**Realities**
- Gynecological exams are important for detecting sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and some types of cancer. These exams are indispensable for all women, no matter their sexual orientation. However, lesbians tend to take these exams more rarely than heterosexual women.
- Cervical cancer is one of the most frequent types of cancer found in women throughout the world. Any woman having had same-sex relationships or heterosexual relationships can be a carrier of HPV (the Human Papilloma Virus). HPV infection is considered to be the most prevalent STI on the planet. Some variations of the virus can play a significant role in the appearance of cervical cancer.

### Breast Cancers

Breast Cancers also touch women who love women.

In this case, some particular risk factors apply.
- For fear of homophobic reactions, or because they don’t use contraception as often as others, lesbians rarely consult gynecologists. They are screened less often than other women - when such screening would allow early detection of breast cancer.
- On average, lesbians have children less often, which raises the risk of breast cancer.
- Certain studies show that lesbians overuse alcohol and tobacco.

**Risk Factors**
- Being a woman
- Age, especially from the age of 50
- Having one or more cases of breast cancer in your family
- Having certain non-cancerous abnormalities in your breast
- Not having children or having your first child after the age of 30
- Menstruating before the age of 12
- Going through late menopause after the age of 52
- Taking hormones for several years starting at menopause
- Over-consuming alcohol or tobacco
- Being overweight
- Having a sedentary lifestyle.

### Symptoms

Any type of change you notice in your breast, like:
- Appearance of dimpling of the surface of the breast
- Liquid discharge by the nipple
- Different texture or coloration of the skin or areola
- Eczema around the areola or the nipple
- Inverted nipple
- Presence of a growth in the breast or armpits
- Change in the sensibility, total change in the appearance of the breast or in its size.

**Prevention**

No lifestyle guarantees avoiding cancer 100%. However, it’s important to minimize all the risks: avoid being overweight, regularly engage in physical activity, limit your consumption of alcohol, don’t smoke, eat balanced and varied meals.

### Cervical Cancers

In certain developing countries, cervical cancers are the main reason for death by cancer among women. This is mainly due to specific sociological and medical conditions.

**Risk Factors**
- The principal factors are chronic infections by certain kinds of HPV (Human Papilloma Virus), and, to a lesser extent, smoking. Between 85% and 90% of cervical cancers develop following a chronic infection by HPV. Any woman who has had same-sex or heterosexual relations can come into contact with an HPV virus. An HPV infection is very contagious and is transmitted by sexual contact with or without penetration. Most infections pass without being seen and heal spontaneously without any lasting effects. However, in certain cases, the infection can become chronic and leave pre-cancerous lesions around the cervix that can develop into cancer.

**Symptoms**

In the early stage, there are no visible symptoms. Later, one may observe some blood loss between menstrual cycles, after menopause or after sexual activity. White, painless discharges are sometimes linked to the cancer as well.

**Prevention**

Screening (pap smears) and vaccination against HPV (advised for women before their first sexual relation) are important ways of prevention, as well as a proper, healthy lifestyle. Not smoking, or quitting to smoke, is beneficial for health in general, but also contributes to a smaller chance of diagnosis of cervical cancer.

### Screening by Pap Smear

Cervical cancer is one type of rare cancer that can be detected and treated early. It is, therefore, important that all women have regular gynecological screenings. Every woman is advised to take her first pap smear within a year of her first sexual activity, or starting at 18 or 25 years of age (age recommendation differs according to the country). This exam allows identification of precancerous lesions and, if necessary, treatment.

### Vaccination Against HPV

Since 2008, two vaccines have protected against the several kinds of HPV that are responsible for 70% of cervical cancer. In some countries the vaccination is free for adolescents and young women.

However, the vaccination doesn’t replace regular pap smear screenings!

### Some helpful websites
- The Lesbian and Gay Foundation - www.lgf.org.uk
- The Maunter Project - www.maunterproject.org
Breast Cancers
& Cervical Cancers

The risk of breast cancer increases with age

Self-checking one’s breasts is an important exercise for screening cancer

Regular gynecological exams help to detect and treat breast and cervical cancers. Speak with your doctor about it

Vaccination highly reduces the risk of cervical cancer

HPV infection is transmitted by non protected same-sex or heterosexual relations

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STIs & HIV

You should consult a doctor with some symptoms.

It is important to know your body, and to be aware of all changes.

Certain STIs like Hepatitis B can be transmitted through kissing.

Create a dental dam or a latex square by using a condom.

HIV can transmit itself from drug use or through sharing a used syringe or straw.

Sexual practices between women also expose them to the risk of HIV and STIs.
Well-Being

Taking care of yourself is pleasant, and it is good for your morale. So why deny it to yourself?

On average seven out of ten cancers are linked to our lifestyles. A healthy lifestyle can help to reduce the risks of cancer and other illnesses.

Some advice for keeping yourself healthy: avoid becoming overweight, do not expose yourself too much to the sun, limit the amount of alcohol that you consume, don’t smoke, eat healthy and well-balanced meals, don’t use legal or illegal drugs, and participate in physical exercise on a regular basis.

Addictions

In lesbian circles, particularly in big cities, the opportunity to meet is generally linked to parties, nightclubs and cafés, all where the consumption of alcohol, tobacco, and drugs, legal or illegal, is more readily accessible. Some lesbians develop their social lives exclusively in these environments, whereas others prefer to spend time with a more limited circle of friends.

The over-consumption of alcohol, or even moderate consumption of tobacco or drug usage will deteriorate your health and will have an impact on your physical and mental well-being.

The perception of risks diminishes under the influence of certain substances, which can carry a risk of sexual practices with a risk of STIs. Knowing yourself well and being aware of the risks of dependence on drugs helps put matters into your own hands in all circumstances.

Depression

Lesbians are at a higher risk of depression than straight women, because they are subjected to discrimination linked to their sexual orientation (lesbophobia).

Lesbophobia describes the rejection, fear, hatred, violence and discrimination towards homosexual women. Lesbophobia consists of a double discrimination where lesbians are the victims as homosexuals (homophobia) and as women (sexism).

Coming out

To no longer live one’s homosexuality in secret, to be oneself and to bloom requires to live openly with loving, positive people who will listen when you need it.

You can also call on groups or health professionals for psychological help or for therapy.

If you make the choice to come out, here are several points to keep in mind:

• Choose the person to whom you want to come out to first
• Choose the moment when you feel comfortable to talk about it
• Respect the time it takes for people with whom you talk to accept the news
• Keep in mind a place where you can go if it does not go well, or think about people close to you who can support you.

And with medical professionals?

Each person must decide to what extent she feels comfortable in talking about her sexual orientation. Sexual orientation is not the direct cause of cancer or another sickness, but it can have an indirect influence. Whatever the decision you make, it is important to feel confident with your doctor. If this is not the case, you should address your concerns to somebody else.

Some helpful websites

Lesbian Health Center - www.lesbianhealthinfo.org
Lesbian and Gay Foundation: The fight against homophobia - www.lgf.org.uk
Avert - www.avert.org

“Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”
www.who.int
Well-Being

It is essential to be surrounded by loving, positive people who can listen when you need it.

The over-consumption of alcohol, or even moderate consumption of tobacco or drugs can deteriorate one's health.

Depression is a disease, not homosexuality.

Eat balanced meals.

Taking part in regular physical activity.