

Lesbians and women who have sex with women have many of the same health needs as other women, but cultural differences and 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 healthcare provider are aware of your healthcare 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. Factors that can increase a women's risk for heart disease include: smoking, alcohol use, obesity and stress - all of which seem to be more prevalent among lesbians compared to straight women. Have annual blood pressure and cholesterol exams to reduce your risk. Stay physically active, don't smoke, eat well and maintain a healthy weight.

## Alcohol & Drug Use

There is some evidence that lesbians are more likely to use alcohol and other drugs compared to heterosexual women. Lesbians are more likely to report experiencing problems from alcohol and continue to drink as they age. Alcohol and drugs are sometimes used to cope with discrimination and internalized homophobia in queer communities. Additionally, lesbian and gay bars often provide the only comfortable space to meet other women. Learning about the drugs you use can help make them safer. Ask yourself if your drug use is affecting your health, relationships, job or finances. Also consider whether it 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 healthcare provider can help you choose one that is right for you. The HCS Health Educator can assess you for the Drink Wise program which assists you in cutting back on alcohol use. Call 613-520-6676 for more information.

## Partner Abuse

Abuse can happen in any relationship, but abuse between women is often misunderstood or trivialized. Abuse 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, forced sexual acts, name-calling, threats and financial control. While limited services exist, abused lesbians can seek help and support by talking with family, friends or a HCS or off-campus counsellor. Women who are abusive can seek professional help by talking with their healthcare provider or a counsellor.

## Tobacco & Smoking

The minimal research that has been completed indicates that lesbians smoke at much higher rates than straight women. 20% of Canadian adults over 15 were current smokers while estimates for lesbians ranged from 30-50% in 2004. 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 start smoking than heterosexual teenagers, and are at an increased risk for developing cancers, heart disease and emphysema. There are programs and resources to help you successfully quit smoking. Check out [www.gosmokefree.ca](http://www.gosmokefree.ca)

## 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 may be increased by higher body weights and alcohol consumption, and the great 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 factors for other cancers. It is important 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 difficult 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 self-esteem and self-identity, and studies show that lesbians suffer from depression, anxiety and suicide at higher rates than heterosexual women. Try to find support to cope with stress if you feel depressed. You might want to speak to family and friends, a counsellor or others in a support group. The campus GLBTQ Centre is also a great resource. Meditation, exercise and making time for things you enjoy may also help.

## Nutrition, Fitness & Weight

Nutrition and weight can be difficult to talk about in lesbian communities from a health perspective. 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 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 wanting to look good and having a healthy body image is totally acceptable, nutrition and weight concerns can become unhealthy if they make you feel depressed or cause physical harm. 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 passed from woman to woman, STIs such as herpes, HPV (genital wart virus) and trichomoniasis are transmitted fairly easily. 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. Reduce your risk and protect your partners by getting regular STI testing and using latex barriers such as condoms, dental dams and gloves with lube. Take care of your sex toys by using condoms and cleaning them before and after sharing with your partner(s). Use birth control if necessary.

## 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.

This can be a challenge for women who have sex with women given the stress of dealing with prejudice and discrimination. However, being lesbian is a wonderful, positive experience for many women and sexual orientation can be a source of pride and celebration.

Many women become 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 stay 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 these stressors
- Learning about your body so that you know what to do to take care of yourself

## Good Health Care

Finding good healthcare can be difficult for lesbians and women who have sex with women. Healthcare providers may be homophobic or they may not know much about your health concerns. This can make it difficult to come out to your healthcare provider, and some women avoid seeking healthcare altogether. However, 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 healthcare:

- Ask GLBTQ friends about their healthcare providers, or check local queer newspapers and community directories for advice
- Visit potential providers and ask questions about their training and experience with GLBTQ health issues
- Check out the office space and look for gay-friendly posters, brochures, magazines or other signs of a GLBTQ-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
- Come out to your provider if you feel safe
- Shop around to find the best healthcare possible



## Ottawa Resources

### Canadian Cancer Society

Cancer Info Service 1-888-939-3333  
Smoker's Helpline 1-877-513-5333  
[www.cancer.ca](http://www.cancer.ca)

### The Sexual Health Centre

STI and Anonymous HIV Testing  
Sexual Health Info Line 613-563-2437

### Pink Triangle Services

Serving the gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, two-spirit and queer communities in Ottawa  
613-563-4818  
[www.pinktriangle.org](http://www.pinktriangle.org)

### Carleton University GLBTQ Centre

613-520-3723  
[www.cusaonline.com/glbtc](http://www.cusaonline.com/glbtc)

## Internet Resources

### Lesbian Health Research Centre

[www.lesbianhealthinfo.org](http://www.lesbianhealthinfo.org)

### LesbianSTD

[www.lesbianstd.com](http://www.lesbianstd.com)

### Canadian Rainbow Health Coalition

[www.rainbowhealth.ca](http://www.rainbowhealth.ca)

### LGBT Health Channel

[www.gayhealthchannel.com](http://www.gayhealthchannel.com)

### GLBT Health

[www.metrokc.gov/health/glbtc/](http://www.metrokc.gov/health/glbtc/)

Adapted from the Sherbourne Health Centre  
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# Lesbian Health

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



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