

# SEXUAL HEALTH GUIDE

For Lesbian and Bisexual women  
living in Norfolk



[www.norfolklgbtproject.co.uk](http://www.norfolklgbtproject.co.uk)

NORFOLK  
**LGBT+**  
**PROJECT**

**SUPPORT INFORMATION ADVICE**

[www.norfolklgbtproject.co.uk](http://www.norfolklgbtproject.co.uk)

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Produced by Norfolk LGBT+ Project

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# World Health Organisation

“Sexual health is a state of physical, emotional, mental and social wellbeing in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity.

Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence.

For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled.”

This booklet is a guide for women who have sex with women, it includes topics such as STIs, sexual behaviour, safer sex, sex toys and gives details of iCaSH services. (Integrated contraception and sexual health services)

Free dental dams, condoms and lube can be collected by appointment from our office, please email [info@norfolklgbtproject.co.uk](mailto:info@norfolklgbtproject.co.uk)

# Introduction

Sexual health is an important part of our overall well-being, therefore we should take responsibility for the choices we make.  
Good health = Good sex.

Information in relation to lesbian and bisexual women's sexual health in this country has been largely overlooked for many years.

Sexual relationships between two women is not without some risk, some women who now identify as lesbian or bisexual may have had sex with a man at some point in their life, therefore it is important to know the risks and take proper precautions towards protecting yourself and your sexual health.

# Safer Sex

'Safer sex' refers to sex in which the risk of becoming infected with HIV or an STI is minimised. Lesbians and bisexuals can protect themselves from HIV and many STIs by insuring that infected fluids, such as blood or vaginal fluids do not enter their body during sex. Any one-to-one contact or using the same hand when touching yourself and then your partner, can put you at risk.

Two women that are both menstruating are at a higher risk, too. Precautions that can be taken include not sharing sex toys, or if doing so using a new condom for each partner. Certain sexual activities are also considered to be lower risk, for example hugging, touching, massage and masturbation. However, STIs such as herpes can be passed on through skin contact alone. The only way for two women to be sure that they are not at risk during sex is if both have been fully tested and have not had sexual contact with any other women or men since.

## Tips for Safer Sex between two women:

- If you are using sex toys, use a new condom for each partner or between penetration of different orifices. Sex toys should be washed with soap and water between sessions.
- Avoid oral sex if either of you has any cuts or sores in the mouth or on the lips, or use a dental dam. A dental dam is a latex or polyurethane (very thin, soft plastic) square, of about 15cm by 15cm, which you can cover the anus or female genitals during oral sex. It acts as a barrier to help prevent sexually transmitted infections passing from one person to another.
- Some infections can be transmitted by hands, fingers and mutual vulva rubbing. Wash your hands before and after sex.
- Wear latex gloves and use plenty of water-based lubricant for vaginal and anal fisting.

# Cleaning Sex Toys & Avoiding STIs

If you use sex toys, it is important to do so responsibly and to keep them clean. Sex toys can pass sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and blood borne infections (infections passed on through the blood)

## If you use sex toys, you can help to avoid STIs by:

- Keeping sex toys clean: wash them after each use, how you clean a sex toy depends on what the sex toy is made of and if the sex toy uses batteries and has parts that cannot be washed.
- Sex toys should come with advice about how to clean and store them. Follow the manufacturers instructions carefully.
- For sex toys that can be washed, make sure you wash them thoroughly in warm water and soap after each use.
- Also wash them between uses: on different parts of the body, such as the mouth, vagina and anus. Check sex toys regularly for any scratches or breaks in the surface material where germs could be present and spread, increasing the risk of infection.

## Tips for bisexual women on safer sex with men:

- If you have vaginal, anal or oral sex with a man, use a condom. When used correctly, condoms protect against unintended pregnancy and STIs. In addition to using condoms, find out about the form of contraception that suits you best.

## Higher Risk Sexual Behaviour

What Individuals choose to do behind closed door and consent is given from all those involved is their choice. Some of the sexual activities outlines in this section can be considered extreme for some but natural for others. As long as partners can communicate with each other in what they want and don't want and to know where to draw the line.

### Anal Sex:

For some lesbians, anal sex or penetration is taboo. Anal sex shouldn't be too painful or messy if done properly.

Unlike the vagina, the rectum has no natural lubricants. Make sure you use plenty of lube for any penetration. And if it hurts, stop.

Also, HIV is easily spread through anal sex, so be sure to use a latex glove on your hand or condom on any sex toys you use.

The anus has bacteria that can cause illness. So be sure to clean your sex toys with disinfectant soap after anal play, even if you use a condom. Don't allow bacteria from the anus to enter the vagina.

### **Fisting:**

Although the term fisting may sound violent, the act is not. Fisting is just the name for inserting one's whole hand into a woman's vagina or anus. Once inserted the hand can form into a fist shape, hence the name. Although the vaginal membrane is extremely pliable, care must be taken in fisting.

The woman must be very aroused and lubricated. Always use plenty of lube when fisting.

### **Rimming:**

Rimming is where the tongue is used to stimulate the anus by either licking or penetration. Make sure that your and her anus is always clean before you engage in this practise.

For some people rimming feels different and it is not for everyone so make sure you are honest with your partner.

### **BDSM:**

BDSM is an abbreviation form the terms Bondage, Discipline, Sadism and Masochism. It most often means sex involving dominance and submission. There are numerous variations, none of which can be termed more correct than the other. BDSM (or S&M, D/s, B&D) ranges from spanking to bondage to tickling to "flogging" or whipping.

You as an individual set the limits in agreement with your partner also making sure that any BDSM activities is consented by all those concerned. Your safety is also important, it is useful to agree on using a safe word - especially during role play, so if you are feeling uncomfortable at any point, you can say your safe word and your partner will stop.

# Sex Between Women What are the Risks?

## Sex between women - What are the risks? What if I have never had a sexual relationship with a man?

If you are a woman who identifies as lesbian or bisexual, and maybe you have never had a male sexual partner you may feel that you do not need a sexual health screen.

This may not be the case.

Sex between women is considered low risk for the transmission of sexually transmitted infections, particularly HIV but some infections like herpes and genital warts can be passed on by skin contact or by close genital contact. It is not clear if chlamydia can be spread by transferring infected vaginal fluid or semen to another person's genitals on the fingers or through rubbing female genitals together.

The use of same sex toys could pass on infection. To avoid this, put a new condom over it or wash it in warm, soapy water.

Risks from oral sex are very low, but risks from HIV can be a little higher if one of you have a period, bleeding gums, mouth ulcers or sore throat. If you have an infection in this part of your body, or if your partner has cold sores on the mouth, an infection can be passed on.

# Sexually Transmitted Infections & HIV

## What are sexually transmitted infections and how are they transmitted?

STIs are caused by more than 30 different bacteria, viruses and parasites and are spread predominantly by sexual contact, including vaginal, anal and oral sex.

Some STIs may be spread via skin-to-skin sexual contact.

The organisms causing STIs can also be spread through non-sexual means such as blood products and tissue transfer. Many STIs - including chlamydia, gonorrhoea, hepatitis B, HIV, HPV, HSV2 and syphilis - can also be transmitted from mother to child during pregnancy and childbirth.

A person can have an STI without having obvious symptoms of disease. Therefore, the term “sexually transmitted infection” is a border term than “sexually transmitted disease” (STD).

Common symptoms of STDs include vaginal discharge, urethral discharge in men, genital ulcers, and abdominal pain.

Eight of the more than 30 pathogens known to be transmitted through sexual contact have been linked to the greatest incidence of illness. Of these 8 infections, 4 are currently curable: syphilis, gonorrhoea, chlamydia and trichomoniasis. The other four are viral infections and are incurable, but can be mitigated or modulated through treatment: hepatitis B, herpes, HIV and HPV.

# Viruses

## Genital Warts:

Genital warts are fleshy growths found in the vulval and anal region. They may be itchy but are usually painless. They are caused by certain strains of Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), which are usually sexually acquired via skin contact, such as rubbing vulvas together.

Women with genital warts do not need more regular smear tests than those without. There are a variety of treatment options including freezing and medicated cream.

## Genital Herpes:

Genital herpes is caused by a virus called Herpes Simplex Virus (HSV), which can spread if you have vaginal, anal and/or oral sex, or share sex toys.

HSV can also cause 'cold sores' on the mouth and nose. Symptoms include painful blisters and ulcers around the genital area. Some women may acquire HSV infection but have no symptoms. After an episode of HSV, the virus becomes dormant but can recur in the future. Usually these recurrences are much milder than the first episode of HSV infection. Anti-viral tablets can help the healing process and shorten the length of the episode.

# Hepatitis

Hepatitis is inflammation of the liver, which in some people may eventually lead to liver failure. It can be caused by viral infections. Including Hepatitis A, B & C.

## Hepatitis A:

Hepatitis A can be transmitted through contaminated food and water supplies. It can also be transmitted through sex involving mouth to anus contact (rimming). There are often no symptoms, and most people recover fully with no complications. Vaccination is available for people at high risk of infection.

## Hepatitis B:

Hepatitis B is predominantly a blood-borne virus, but it can be detected in other body fluids, such as saliva, semen and vaginal fluids and therefore can be sexually transmitted. The risk is higher if a partner is menstruating. Transmission can also occur through sharing needles, cutting equipment and non-sterile tattooing equipment. Most people notice no symptoms, although one sign of infection is jaundice. Vaccination is available for people at high risk of infection.

## Hepatitis C:

Hepatitis C is a blood-borne virus, which is mainly found in blood itself. Therefore, it is more prevalent in people who share needles and through exchange of blood products. There is evidence that it can be sexually transmitted, although it is more common in people already infected with HIV.

# Bacteria

## Bacterial Vaginosis:

Bacterial Vaginosis occurs when there is a change in the vaginal acidity which encourages an overgrowth of mixed vaginal bacteria. The cause of BV is usually unknown, but it may be triggered by the use of perfumed soaps/bubble bath and vaginal douching. There is usually an increase in vaginal discharge, which is often described as 'milky', and some women may complain of a 'fishy' odour. Some women may also have BV without symptoms.

Symptomatic women may be treated with antibiotics.

In pregnancy BV has been linked to premature labour and miscarriage. It may be possible to transmit BV during sex between women (although at present the mechanisms of transmission are not really known) so it is suggested to avoid sharing sex toys unless using condoms (see safer sex section on page 6).

## Thrush:

Thrush is caused by an overgrowth of yeast called candida. Signs and symptoms may include vulval and vaginal itching, pain and soreness on penetration, redness of the vulva, burning when passing urine and a thick white discharge.

Trigger factors for thrush include wearing tight clothing, using perfumed soap/bubble bath, taking antibiotics and, sometimes, sex.

It may be possible to transmit thrush during sex between women through touching and sharing sex toys. Thrush can be treated with medicated cream, pessaries and tablets. These can be bought from a chemist, but if symptoms persist visit your doctor.

## Chlamydia, Gonorrhoea & Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (PID)

### Chlamydia, Gonorrhoea and (PID):

Chlamydia and gonorrhoea are caused by bacteria which can infect the cervix, rectum, throat and urethra. There may be a discharge but usually there are no symptoms. If left untreated these bacteria may lead to an infection in the fallopian tubes called Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (PID). This may cause pain in the pelvic area especially during vaginal penetration and sometimes leads to fertility problems. If present these infections may be passed between women on shared sex toys, hands and by rubbing vulvas together (tribadism). Treatment is with antibiotics.

### Syphilis:

Syphilis is a bacterial infection causing a painless ulcer, usually found in the genital area. This will disappear on its own and then some weeks to months later other symptoms may appear, such as a body rash and swollen glands. These too will disappear leaving no symptoms, but the bacteria itself will stay present. If left untreated, syphilis can in later years cause serious nerve and body organ damage. In its initial stages syphilis is very infectious and it can be passed on by close skin contact during sex. After the first two years or so it stops being infectious at all. Treatment is with antibiotic injections or tablets.

### Parasites:

Some parasites can be transmitted by either close or sexual contact. For example, crabs/pubic lice cling to pubic and other body hair causing itching and sometimes blood spots from bites. They are spread through naked body/skin contact. Pubic lice and scabies. Both of these infections are caused by parasites. Pubic lice can be found in pubic hair and other body hair, including eyebrows and eyelashes. They are spread by close physical contact and, rarely, through contact with infected bedding and towels. Pubic lice cause itching and spots of blood may be noticed where there are bites on the skin. Scabies affects the genitals, the lower abdomen, wrists and in between the fingers.

# HIV & AIDS

## HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus)

HIV is a virus that can be detected in body fluids, such as blood, semen and vaginal fluid. It can enter the bloodstream through breaks in the skin and mucous membranes during sex. It can also be transmitted through sharing needles, cutting equipment and non-sterile tattooing equipment. There is currently no vaccination for HIV - however antiviral treatments are available if diagnosed with HIV.

It is argued that the widespread assumption that lesbians are a low-risk population increases some lesbian's risk of HI infection as they believe HIV is not something that they need to be concerned about. Very few women are known to have passed HIV on to other women sexually. However, some lesbian sexual practices do carry a risk of HIV transmission and precautions need to be taken to protect against infection.

## AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome)

AIDS is the term for a collection of opportunistic infections, which may occur in some HIV positive people. Early detection and treatment of HIV generally reduces the likelihood of developing AIDS.

## What are the HIV risks for Lesbians?

HIV is in the blood, breast milk, vaginal fluid or semen of someone with HIV, so you are at risk if you get any of these fluids inside your body. The risks of sexually transmitting HIV between women are low. Very few women are known to have passed HIV on to other women sexually. However, some lesbian sexual practices do carry a risk of HIV transmission and precautions need to be taken to protect against infection.

### Oral Sex

The risk of HIV being passed on through oral sex is low, but it is increased if a woman has cuts or sores in her mouth, or if the partner receiving oral sex has sores on her genitals or is having her period. Oral sex is safer if you use a 'dental dam' (a square of latex) to stop any vaginal fluid or menstrual blood getting into your mouth.

### Sharing Sex Toys

Sharing sex toys (for example vibrators) can be risky if they have vaginal fluids (juice), blood or faeces on them. Always clean them well and have one each. This is one area of sex where sharing is a bad idea! Rough sex - any sexual activity that can lead to bleeding or cuts/breaks in the lining of the vagina or anus is risky, including 'fisting' or certain S&M (sadomasochism) activities.

### Donor Insemination

If a woman is thinking about using a sperm donor to get pregnant, she needs to be aware of the potential donor's detailed medical history and any possible risk factors - including drug use and sexual history. It is important that the donor has taken an HIV test.

## Getting Tested

You can get tested for STIs and HIV at a sexual health clinic, testing is free and confidential.

You should attend a sexual health clinic if you have signs and symptoms for any STI.

For example:

- Pain on urination
- An unusual discharge from the vagina or anus
- A rash, sores or blisters near the vagina or anus
- Pain during sex
- Bleeding in between periods

**Remember some STIs like Chlamydia can have no symptoms, if you're worried a clinic can run a full Chlamydia test.**

## Visiting a Sexual Health Clinic

You can make an appointment to go there or use their Sit and Wait clinic (more details on page 21).

You might feel embarrassed, but there's no need - the staff at these clinics are used to testing for all kind of infections.

It's their job and they won't judge you. They should do their best to explain everything to you and make you feel at ease.

### Your Name and Details

When you go to a sexual health clinic, you will be asked for your name and contact details, it will be kept confidential. Your GP won't be told of your visit without your permission.

If you have tests and the results aren't available during your visit, the clinic will need to contact you later, so give them the correct contact details. They will check how you want to receive your results. They can usually be given to you over the phone, in a text or in an unmarked letter.

### Answering some Questions

You will see a doctor or a nurse and they'll ask you about your medical and sexual history. Be prepared to answer questions about you sex life.

Including:

- When you last had sex
- Whether you have had unprotected sex
- Whether you have any symptoms
- Why you think you might have an infection

# Having an STI Test

Depending on which STIs you're tested for, tests may include:

An examination of your genitals, anus, mouth and skin

- Giving a urine sample
- Having a blood sample taken
- A swab from your urethra (the tube through which you pass urine) for both men and women
- A swab from your throat or rectum
- For women, a swab from your vagina or cervix (lower part of the womb)
- An internal examination for women

**Getting tested and treated for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) is straight forward and confidential.  
Most infections can be treated.**

A sexual health clinic specialises in sexual health and gives tests and treatments for many STIs.

Testing for chlamydia and gonorrhoea usually requires only a urine sample.

Testing for HIV and syphilis needs a blood sample.

Tests for herpes aren't usually done unless you have sores on your genitals or anus. In this case, a swab will be taken from a sore.

This will be uncomfortable for a moment.

## Sexual Health Services Where to go?



Integrated contraception and sexual health service

Oak Street  
Norwich  
NR3 3AE

Phone: 0300 300 3030

Vancouver House  
County Court Road  
King's Lynn  
PE30 5EJ

Phone: 0300 300 3030

Breydon Clinic  
Northgate Hospital  
Northgate Street  
Great Yarmouth  
NR30 1BU

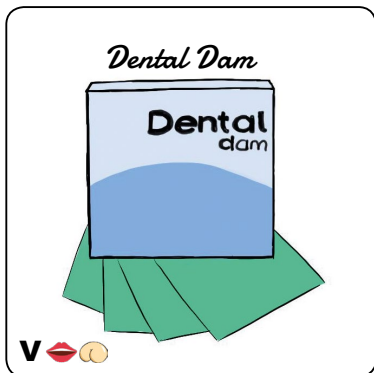
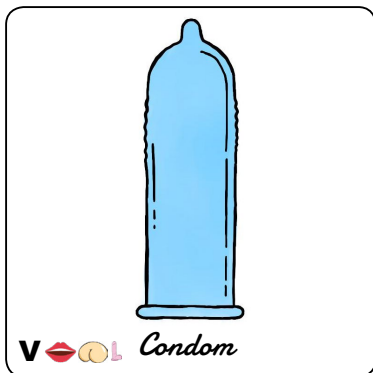
Phone: 0300 300 3030

6 Regent Road  
Lowestoft  
NR32 1PA

Phone: 0300 1233650

For more information please visit  
[www.icash.nhs.uk](http://www.icash.nhs.uk)

# SAFER SEX STARTS WITH YOU



= Sex Toy **V** = Vagina = Mouth = Bum

## Your choices, your responsibility



**PROUD TO BE SAFE**

NORFOLK  
**LGBT+**  
**PROJECT**  
SUPPORT INFORMATION ADVICE

**Norfolk**  
County Council

[www.norfolklgbtproject.co.uk](http://www.norfolklgbtproject.co.uk)

# Women Supporting Women



**Women Supporting Women**

Norfolk & Waveney



Our services are open to women who self-identifies as lesbian, bisexual or questioning their sexuality aged 25+ living in Norfolk.

Our Services include:

- Email and phone support
- 1:1 appointments
- Drop in group every other Saturday 1pm-3pm
- Volunteering opportunities
- Safer sex info packs
- Health and wellbeing information
- Signposting/referrals to other relevant organisations

Please email us at [wsw@norfolklgbtproject.co.uk](mailto:wsw@norfolklgbtproject.co.uk) for more information

WSW is part of Norfolk LGBT+ Project.  
[www.norfolklgbtproject.co.uk](http://www.norfolklgbtproject.co.uk)  
Registered Charity No. 1129770

Providing support that is relevant to the health and wellbeing needs of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community in Norfolk.



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