

Lesbians need Pap tests too





Each year in Australia, about 750 women develop cervical cancer and more than 250 women die of it. Many of these women have not had regular two-yearly Pap tests. Some of these women have never had a Pap test.

A common misconception by some lesbians and health professionals is that lesbians don't need Pap tests. Some believe that being a lesbian is protection against problems like cervical cancer and sexually transmitted diseases. Unfortunately it isn't!

This pamphlet answers some of the more common questions and concerns lesbians have about Pap tests.

Common questions

What causes cervical cancer?

The biggest risk factor for cervical cancer is not having a Pap test every two years.



Other risk factors include:

- the human papilloma virus (HPV) (sometimes called the wart virus), which can cause cell changes that may lead to cervical cancer
- smoking
- lower levels of immunity.

Can lesbians develop cervical cancer?

Yes. A Cancer Council Victoria study showed that 22% of lesbians surveyed had received an abnormal Pap test result. Over time an abnormality can lead to cervical cancer if left untreated. It can be assumed that lesbians have the same risk of cervical cancer as heterosexual women.

Do lesbians need Pap tests?

Yes, they do. All women should start having Pap tests about a year after their first sexual contact or at the age of 18, whichever comes later. This applies to any women who have sex with women.

Can cervical cancer be prevented?

Yes. Having a Pap test every two years until the age of 70 can reduce your risk of developing cervical cancer by up to 90%.

If I have never had sex with a man am I at risk of cervical cancer?

Yes. Genital HPV is spread through genital skin contact during sexual activity. So women who have never had sex with men are still at risk of cervical cancer.

If I have never had sex, am I at risk of cervical cancer?

If you have never been sexually active your risk of cervical cancer is extremely small. However if you've ever been sexually active with a man or a woman you're still at risk of cervical cancer and should have a Pap test.

Is HPV less common in lesbians?

There is currently no evidence to suggest that HPV rates are lower in the lesbian community.

HPV is so common that it could be considered a normal part of being sexually active. Most people will have genital HPV at some time in their life and never know it. HPV is spread through genital skin contact during sexual activity.

It is important to remember that most women with HPV do not develop cervical cancer.

Does the Pap test detect sexually transmitted infections?

No, a Pap test is not a screening test for sexually transmitted infections or conditions. Although a Pap test does not specifically test for HPV, some Pap test results may show that cells of the cervix have been affected by HPV.

How will I know when I am due for my next Pap test?

The Victorian Cervical Cytology Registry records women's Pap test results and will send you a reminder if you are overdue for your next Pap test. Participation in the registry is voluntary.

What if my Pap test result is abnormal?

Most women will have a normal Pap test result, but for those who don't there are effective treatments readily available. For mild changes in the cells, this may mean more frequent observation. Moderate to severe changes to the cells will require further investigation. For further information, talk with your practitioner or visit our website www.papscreen.org.au.

Breaking down the barriers

Having a Pap test is not always easy for lesbians

Community acceptance and recognition of lesbians and lesbian relationships is not always apparent. In relation to health needs, there are a number of issues that lesbians may face:

- finding a suitable practitioner
- confidentiality and disclosing your sexuality
- answering sexual history questions
- bad experiences or discrimination.



Finding a suitable practitioner

Research indicates that women generally prefer female health practitioners, particularly for Pap tests. Finding access to a practitioner who is knowledgeable and understanding of lesbian health issues may be difficult.

There is a list of organisations on the back of this pamphlet that may be able to help you. You could also ask your friends for the name of a practitioner they recommend.

Confidentiality and disclosing your sexuality

The choice to disclose this information is yours, so don't feel that you have to. It may, however, result in a better and more informed health care experience.

If you choose to disclose your sexuality, decide whether you want it recorded or not, as other practitioners could have access to your medical records. Remember, practitioners are required by law to protect your confidentiality and maintain your privacy.

Answering sexual history questions

You may be asked questions like 'Are you sexually active?' and 'What form of contraception are you using?' This frequent assumption that all women are heterosexual can be uncomfortable, so think about how you want to answer these questions. Choosing a good practitioner is important as they will usually use language that acknowledges diversity.

Bad experiences or discrimination

Health practitioners are encouraged to take a sensitive approach to sexual history taking and pelvic examinations, and are generally informed about lesbian health issues. Occasionally a woman may have a bad experience when having a Pap test. If this happens to you, remember that you can stop an examination at any time or leave at any point during the consultation.

It is unlawful to discriminate against someone because of their sexual orientation or status as a same sex couple (Victorian Equal Opportunity Act 1995). You can contact the Health Services Commissioner if you have a complaint (see Useful contacts). If you have had a bad experience but don't want to make a complaint, talk it over with friends or with someone who can offer you support.

Where can I go for Pap tests?

You can go to any general practitioner, gynaecologist or specially trained nurse. For a comprehensive listing of Pap test services in your local area, log on to www.papscreen.org.au. You can select a practitioner based on locality, gender, language spoken and disability access through this listing.

Useful contacts

- The Cancer Council Victoria's Cancer Helpline and PapScreen Victoria: 13 11 20
- Women's Health Services (listed at Women's Health Victoria): 9662 3742 or 1800 133 321 www.whv.org.au
- Royal Women's Hospital: 9344 2183 or 9344 2288 wellwomen.rwh.org.au
- Mercy Hospital for Women, Well Women's Service: 9270 2480 or 8458 4274
- Family Planning Victoria: 9257 0100 www.fpv.org.au
- The Action Centre: 9654 4766 or 1800 013 952
- Gay and Lesbian Switchboard: 9827 8544 or 1800 184 527
- Royal Women's Health Information Centre, Royal Women's Hospital: 9344 2007 or 1800 442 007 wellwomen.rwh.org.au
- Melbourne Sexual Health Centre: 9347 0244 or 1800 032 017 www.mshc.org.au
- WIRE Women's Information: 1300 134 130 www.wire.org.au
- Equal Opportunity Commission of Victoria: 9281 7100 or 1800 134 142 www.eoc.vic.gov.au
- Office of the Health Services Commissioner: 8601 5200 or 1800 136 066 www.health.vic.gov.au/hsc



This pamphlet was developed in consultation with PapScreen Victoria's Lesbian Advisory Group.