

HIV & AIDS : information for lesbians / Terrence Higgins Trust.

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HIV & AIDS

**INFORMATION
FOR LESBIANS**

The Terrence Higgins Trust



Introduction

Lesbians and HIV prevention have been given little attention in the overall response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. This was partly due to there being very few known cases of lesbians with HIV/AIDS combined with little research or knowledge about woman to woman transmission.

In this leaflet we want to explain the low risks that lesbians face from HIV and how to keep it that way by practising safer sex and safer drug use.

Although our sexual practices are considered to be a low risk for HIV transmission, being a lesbian does not provide immunity from HIV. For each of us, keeping our risks to a minimum is dependent on what we do and not how we identify ourselves.

Lesbians **can** get HIV through sharing drug injecting equipment and unsafe sex. We may also have been exposed to the virus in the past through blood transfusions or donor inseminations. It is often hard to talk about the details of what we do in bed. It is time we take an honest look at what we do, how we do it and who we do it with, and learn to minimise the risks we take.

When we do discuss sex, we aren't always entirely truthful for fear of being criticised or rejected. We can no longer afford to allow silence to put our health at risk. It is important that we help each other tell the truth about who we are and what we've done. Not making judgments about the lifestyles and sexual practices of others will go a long way towards encouraging honesty and trust.

HIV is not easily transmitted.

You can't get it through ordinary social contact like sharing food, towels, toilets or hugs.

How can HIV be passed on?

HIV can only be transmitted in certain ways. You are at risk if the blood (including menstrual blood), semen or vaginal fluids of an infected person enters your bloodstream.

If you inject drugs, don't lend or borrow injecting equipment (works). Make good use of your local needle exchange or chemist and stock-up on new works.

If you have to share equipment, clean used works carefully and thoroughly. You do this by flushing the needle and syringe twice with cold water, twice with bleach and then twice with cold water again. Bleach is best, but you can also use washing-up liquid or, as a last resort, cold water on its own.

If you want to get pregnant by donor insemination, all sperm donated to the major clinics is tested for HIV. If you plan to self-inseminate using your own donor or by heterosexual intercourse, you run a risk of HIV infection. You can reduce this risk by ensuring that the man practises safer sex for the 6 months prior to insemination, and then has an HIV test. It is important that you negotiate with a man you trust as he has to agree to practice safer sex from test to pregnancy – which may take a considerable time.

If you have sex with men for a living, it is crucial to have safer sex – either by using a condom for penetrative intercourse or by providing services that do not risk his blood or semen getting into your vagina or rectum e.g. masturbation and fantasy sex.



If you have sex with men for other reasons, it is important that the man wears a condom (for vaginal and anal intercourse) or that you only have non-penetrative sex. For further information on heterosexual safer sex read The Terrence Higgins Trust leaflet **"HIV & AIDS – INFORMATION FOR WOMEN"**.

If you are sexually assaulted in any way, the Rape Crisis Centre (see Helplist) will offer confidential support, regardless of whether you want to report the attack or not.

Remember that many women have been sexually active with men before realising that they were lesbians. So if none of the above applies to you now, it does not rule out risks you or your partner may have taken in the past.

There are a few reported cases of lesbians who have been infected with HIV through sex with other women. It is clear that no other means of transmission could be identified in these cases. There is a high enough concentration of the virus in both blood (including menstrual blood) and vaginal fluids to cause infection. Enjoying safer sex will help to avoid such transmissions.

Lesbian sex and HIV transmission

If the sex you have with women avoids blood or vaginal fluid getting into your bloodstream, or vice versa, then you will already be practising safer sex.

This means that you can carry on kissing her all over, or using your fingers inside her vagina or anus (but do cover cuts, sores, grazes or skin conditions such as eczema on your fingers and hands with plasters or latex gloves).

There is still very little evidence to show that oral sex is risky for HIV transmission. Going down on your partner is safe as long as you do not have bad cuts or sores in the mouth, or bleeding gums. This is particularly important if your girlfriend is having her period or bleeding in any way. Forget dental dams for oral sex – unless they turn you on!

Sex toys such as vibrators and dildos are safe if they are not shared. If you want to share them, put a new condom on them for each user or wash them thoroughly in hot water (as long as the toy is not electrical!). Remember that you may cause internal bleeding if you introduce large things (like fists or some sex toys) inside your own or your partner's vagina or anus. Always use lots of water-based lubricant like "KY".

If you practise S&M sex, anything goes as long as you don't exchange blood. You know the rules!

What if you think you have been at risk?

It is understandable to be worried and scared if you think you might have been exposed to HIV. However, it is worth taking a calm and realistic look at the risks you might have taken and putting them into perspective. Phoning an HIV/AIDS helpline (see Helplist) may sort out your doubts, as well as making clear what you need to do to avoid HIV in the future.

If you think you might want to take an HIV antibody test to find out if you are infected, it is important to know what the test can and cannot tell you. There are both negative and positive implications in having the test that vary from individual to individual. You will need support from a trained counsellor at either a voluntary organisation like The Terrence Higgins Trust or a sexually transmitted disease clinic, in order to make a good informed decision.

Do keep in mind that testing positive does not necessarily mean you will develop AIDS, or that you will inevitably become ill. Many women with HIV lead full and active lives. There are also many organisations who provide a variety of services to people with HIV/AIDS. Do use them.

Even if you decide you have not been at risk in the past, you seriously need to consider safer sex to protect yourself and your partners in the future from HIV.

Safer sex aids

Latex Gloves are available from Douglas Pharmacy, 18 Copenhagen Street, London N1 (tel: 071-837 6861)

Condoms and **water-based lubricants** such as "KY" can be bought in any chemist.

Dental dams can be ordered in bulk (36 sheets per box) through Health & Co. (196 Great Cambridge Road, Enfield EN1 1UN 081-366 4412).

Telephone The Terrence Higgins Trust for more information about suppliers of these products.

Conclusion

Fortunately for lesbians, what we do in bed with each other poses very little risk of HIV being passed on. What is more important is that we have to confront our fears and prejudices which may prevent open and supportive discussions about this new health problem. It is vital that we create a climate of trust where lesbians with HIV can feel safe.

For lesbians who share works or have sex with men occasionally, there is a greater risk involved. Practise safer sex and drug use to reduce these risks.

For further information on these and other issues like negotiating safer sex, dealing with a positive result and caring for children with HIV see The Terrence Higgins Trust leaflet "HIV & AIDS – INFORMATION FOR WOMEN".

Helplist

The Terrence Higgins Trust

52-54 Grays Inn Road, London WC1X 8JU

The Terrence Higgins Trust offers a wide range of services which are open to all women.

For women with HIV, help on welfare rights, housing and legal matters is available from the Advice Centre; practical help is offered by our Helper Cell Project and befriending by our Buddy Service.

Women counsellors, buddies and helpline volunteers are available upon request. Support for drug users (including those in prison) is also provided.

To access any of these services, please telephone us on 071-831 0330.

Helpline:

071-242 1010 3pm-10pm daily

Legal Line:

071-405 2381 7pm-10pm Wednesday

Advice Centre:

071-831 0330 10am- 5pm weekdays

Helplines

London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard

071-837 7324 24 hours a day

Staffed by lesbian and gay volunteers who are trained to answer enquiries about HIV/AIDS and safer sex. You can ask to speak to a lesbian if you prefer.

London Lesbian Line

071-251 6911 Weekdays 7pm-10pm

National Aids Helpline

0800 567123 24 hours a day

All calls are free from anywhere in the UK. You can ask to speak to a woman if you prefer.

Help is also available in the following community languages:-

Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu: 0800 282445

6pm-10pm Wednesday

Cantonese: 0800 282446 6pm-10pm Tuesday

Arabic: 0800 282447 6pm-10pm Wednesday

A Minicom is available for the hearing impaired:

0800 521361 10am-10pm daily

Support Groups

Positively Women

5 Sebastian Street, London EC1V 0HE 071-490 5515

Positively Women holds weekly support group sessions and individual counselling for women with HIV/AIDS. Local support groups are being set up in different areas in London and they have good leaflets on various HIV related topics for women.

The Landmark

47a Tulse Hill, London SW2 2TN 081-678 6686

Holds open women's evenings every Wednesday.

Drugs Help

Mainliners

205 Stockwell Road, London SW9 9SL

071-738 4656 (client services) 071-737 7472 (administration)

Has support groups and provides advice for people with HIV/AIDS who are, or have been, drug users.

Angel Project

38-44 Liverpool Road, London N1 OPU 071-226 3113

The Angel Project provides free dental dams as well as offering advice and information for people with drug related problems.

They also operate a syringe exchange. Women's sessions are held on Wednesdays from 2pm-5pm and women workers are available.

Insemination and Pregnancy

Women's Health

52-54 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8RT 071-251 6580
Information and resource centre about women's health issues, providing lists of clinics offering donor insemination services. Leaflets on HIV/AIDS, donor insemination and other topics are available.

Other Helpful Organisations

Black Lesbian and Gay Centre

081-885 3543 Tuesdays & Thursdays 2pm-5pm
071-837 5364 Helpline – Thursday 7pm-10pm
Information and advice on all topics relevant to black lesbians and gay men, including HIV/AIDS.

London Lighthouse

111-117 Lancaster Road, London W11 1QT 071-792 1200
Runs a wide range of services for people with HIV/AIDS and those who care for them, including activities for women affected by HIV.

Pace

c/o London Lesbian and Gay Centre, 67-69 Cowcross Street,
London EC1M 6BP 071-251 2689
Offers training courses and individual counselling to lesbians and gay men on a range of issues, including HIV/AIDS.

Rape Crisis Centre

071-837 1600 24 hour service
National network of helplines offering support, counselling and help to women/girls who have been raped or sexually assaulted.

The Terrence Higgins Trust



A Registered Charity to Inform, Advise and Help on
AIDS and HIV infection

52-54 Grays Inn Road, London WC1X 8JU

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