

You should also get tested for HIV annually, or more often if you change partners, have casual or new partners or have been diagnosed with an STI.

Consider the following recommendations to reduce your risk of STIs and blood-borne viruses to you and your partner(s):

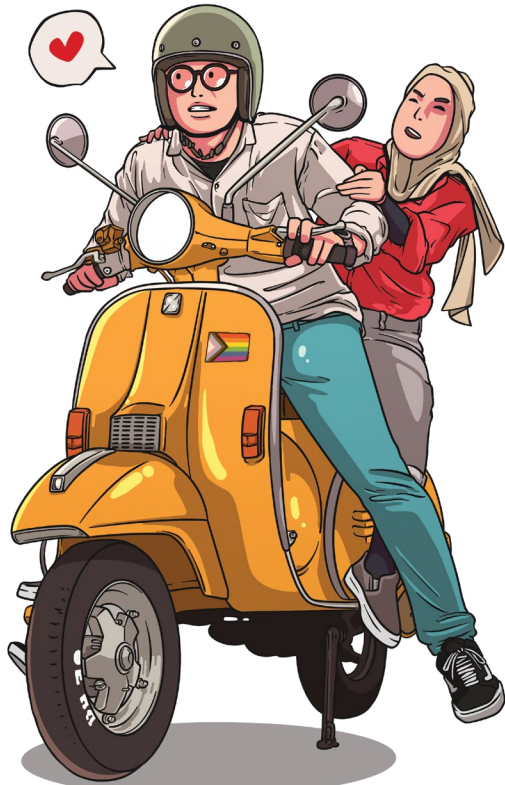
- Negotiate safety with your partner(s) and discuss acceptable levels of risk everyone involved.
- Use barriers such as gloves, dental dams, and condoms with body parts and sex toys; many sexual health clinics and other health care facilities offer these free-of-charge.
- If you're using sex toys, clean before sharing with a partner, and use a new condom for each partner or between penetration of different body openings.
- Avoid oral sex if either of you has any cuts or sore in the mouth or on the lips.
- Use a condom and/or a dental dam for oral sex acts. A dental dam is a latex or polyurethane (very thin, soft plastic) square, to cover the anus or vulva during oral sex.
- Be aware that the use of alcohol and drugs before or during sex, sharing needles, and some BDSM/kink activities may involve a greater level of risk and should include negotiation.
- Wash your hands before and after sex. Some infections can be transmitted by hands, fingers, and mutual vulval rubbing.
- Wear latex gloves and use plenty of water-based lubricant for vaginal and anal fisting.
- Some trans people taking hormones may still be able to get pregnant or impregnate their partner. To reduce the risk of unplanned pregnancy, use a condom, other barrier method, or talk to your health care provider about options.

## RELATIONSHIP SAFETY AND HEALTH

Healthy relationships are based on mutual respect, open communication, and make you feel happy, supported and loved.

Intimate partner violence is physical or sexual violence, stalking, or emotional or psychological abuse by a current or former partner. If your partner treats you in a way that makes you feel unsafe or bad about yourself, depressed or anxious; if your partner harasses and follows you; controls your money, where you go and who you see; if your partner threatens you; if your partners hits, punches or kicks you or forces you to engage in sexual activity against your will - don't suffer in silence.

If you feel unsafe or have experienced abuse or violence in your relationship, you can seek support from a health care provider, a counsellor, or a crisis line. If there is any possibility that your partner(s) would access the same support services as you, especially in a small community, let the service provider know.



**Find support and help**  
Ontario Victim Support Line  
1-888-579-2888

### Assaulted Women's Helpline


[awhl.org](http://awhl.org)  
Toll free: 1-866-863-0511  
Toll-free TTY: 1-866-863-7868  
#SAFE (#7233) On your Bell, Rogers, Fido or Telus mobile phone

## ADDITIONAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS RESOURCES

Visit [rainbowhealthontario.ca/2slgbtq-health-resources](http://rainbowhealthontario.ca/2slgbtq-health-resources) or scan this code with your mobile device:



This brochure was created by Rainbow Health Ontario (RHO). A program of Sherbourne Health, RHO creates opportunities for the healthcare system to better serve 2SLGBTQ communities.

 [RainbowHealthOntario.ca](http://RainbowHealthOntario.ca)  
 [twitter.com/RainbowHealthOn](https://twitter.com/RainbowHealthOn)  
 [facebook.com/RainbowHealthOntario](https://facebook.com/RainbowHealthOntario)

Health care providers can visit [Learn.RainbowHealthOntario.ca](http://Learn.RainbowHealthOntario.ca) to find out more about our courses designed to increase competency in serving 2SLGBTQ service users.



# about lesbian health

Lesbians and women who have sex with women (WSW) are a diverse community.

Lesbians have many of the same health care needs as women in the general population but are at a higher risk for certain diseases.

Your health is influenced by many factors beyond sexual orientation. Discrimination, racism, and negative attitudes towards lesbians are not uncommon and may be experienced when seeking health care.

Health care providers may be homophobic, or they may not know much about your health concerns.

This brochure outlines some of the health issues of concern to lesbians.



rainbow health ontario  
SHERBOURNE HEALTH

## TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR HEALTH

Being healthy means taking care of your physical, emotional, sexual, psychological, and spiritual needs. It can be difficult to come out about your sexual orientation, gender identity or medical history to your health care provider. But being your authentic self can promote good health and wellbeing.

Don't delay or avoid seeking services because you had negative experiences, or are concerned about discrimination, stigma, confidentiality, your immigration status, or other factors. Getting regular check-ups and care from a compassionate, knowledgeable, and informed care provider is important to stay healthy.

### TIPS TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF HEALTH CARE YOU RECEIVE

- Educate yourself about possible health concerns, risks, and options. Your sexual orientation, race or ethnicity may increase your risk for certain diseases and conditions.
- Seek out health care providers and spaces that are 2SLGBTQ-positive.
- Visit potential providers and ask questions. You have every right to know what training and experience your provider has in 2SLGBTQ care.
- Listen for how the provider speaks with you and whether you are encouraged to talk about your concerns. If your provider seems open but uninformed, you can suggest Rainbow Health Ontario's courses designed to increase 2SLGBTQ competency for health care providers.
- Bring a support person with you to your appointment.
- If you feel safe, identify yourself as lesbian so that you can be open about discussing the issues that are of concern to you, and help your provider better understand how to help you stay healthy.
- If you do not feel comfortable with a provider, look for another.

## FINDING A HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONAL

Ask other 2SLGBTQ people for recommendations about health care providers and services. Several large cities now have health care centres that provide comprehensive, 2SLGBTQ-competent care.

If there are few providers in your region, look into accessing providers via the Ontario Telemedicine Network.

**RHO Service Provider Directory**  
[rainbowhealthontario.ca/lgbt2sq-health/service-provider-directory/](https://rainbowhealthontario.ca/lgbt2sq-health/service-provider-directory/)

## HEALTH RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH USING ALCOHOL, TOBACCO, DRUGS

Some studies suggest that use of tobacco, alcohol and other recreational drugs may be higher among 2SLGBTQ individuals when compared to the general population.

If you use tobacco, alcohol or drugs, learning about the effects and side effects can help make your use safer. There are many types of harm reduction and cessation programs, and your health care provider can help you choose one that's right for you.

## CANCER SCREENING

Screening can stop cancer before it starts or can detect cancer in its early stages, at which point it is more treatable and/or curable.

Who should get screened?

- Individuals should be screened for cancer based on the organs that they have (e.g. prostate, testicles, cervix, breasts, colon), rather than based their gender identity or sexual orientation/practices.
- Anyone with breast tissue is at risk for breast cancer and should be screened according to guidelines. Make sure you are enrolled in the Ontario Breast Screening Program, which may not happen automatically depending on your gender on file.
- Regular screenings for cervical, prostate, testicular and colon cancer may be recommended based on age and risk; screening for prostate or testicular cancer may be considered on a case-by-case basis.
- Some providers recommend that people who have anal sex get regular anal pap screening, though this is not currently widely available.

Speak to your general practitioner about cancer screening. You have the right to receive screening that is appropriate for you. If you don't have a general practitioner, there are some screenings that are available without a referral.

## YOUR EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

Your mental health is influenced by your sense of self-worth and the level of stress you experience, as well as the acceptance and inclusiveness of spaces where you live, work, and play. Most lesbians have and maintain good mental health. However, homophobic environments can have negative effects on your health.

The burdens of stress and discrimination may be more acute for lesbians who have experienced other forms of trauma, are Indigenous, racialized, or are living with a disability. As a result, lesbians may experience higher rates of mental distress, depression, anxiety, suicide, and illegal substance use when compared to other women.

## MAINTAINING AND IMPROVING EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

Having a supportive group of friends and family members (whether family of origin or chosen family) who understand and affirm your sexuality is often key to successfully dealing with the stress of day-to-day life and maintaining good mental health.

You can also find support by:

- Getting involved in community, social, athletic, religious, peer support and other groups.
- Exploring various coping strategies to deal with stresses and manage self-care such as meditation, physical activity and enjoyable activities.
- Seeking mental health counseling and support groups that are sensitive to the needs of lesbians and WSW.

## BODY IMAGE AND HEALTH

Body image, or the way that you view your own body, is something that impacts people of all shapes, sizes, colors, sexualities, and genders. Individuals in 2SLGBTQ communities experience and confront body image issues in unique ways. Studies have found that a higher proportion of lesbian and bisexual people reported feelings of anxiety and depression because of their body image when compared to heterosexual people.

The 2SLGBTQ community is disproportionately affected by eating disorders. Nutrition and weight concerns can become unhealthy if they make you feel depressed, cause physical harm, result in eating disorders, or put you at further risk for chronic health diseases such as diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease. Healthy bodies come in all shapes and sizes.

## SEXUAL HEALTH

If you're having sex, there are ways to do it safely so you're protecting yourself and others. You should feel safe, empowered, and have the kind of sex you want. You should never be pushed into anything that you are uncomfortable with.

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are spread through sexual contact with someone who has an STI. Sexual contact includes oral, anal, and vaginal sex, as well as genital skin-to-skin contact. If two partners are both menstruating, they are at a higher risk of contracting certain STIs.

Women who have sex with other women can pass on or get STIs, such as herpes, and chlamydia. Human papillomavirus (HPV), bacterial vaginosis and trichomoniasis can also spread between lesbian partners. Oral sex and sexual behavior involving digital-vaginal or digital-anal contact, particularly with shared penetrative sex toys, can spread infections as well.

Most STIs have no signs or symptoms. The only way to know your STI status is to get tested. Sexually active lesbians should consider routine tests for chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis. Other testing may be considered if symptoms of specific STI risk factors are present.