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Lesbian and Bisexual Health

Q: What does it mean to be a lesbian?

A: A lesbian is a woman who has sex with another woman, even if it is only sometimes. A lesbian is currently only having sex with a woman, even if she has had sex with men in the past.

Q: What does it mean to be bisexual?

A: A bisexual person is sexually attracted to, or sexually active with, both men and women.

Q: What are important health issues that lesbians and bisexual women should discuss with health care professionals?

A: It is important to know that most lesbians and bisexual women can lead healthy and normal lives. Still, some health problems are more common among lesbian and bisexual women. More research is needed, especially looking at bisexual women's risks compared to lesbians' risks. There are a number of health issues that lesbians and bisexual women should talk about with a doctor or nurse.

Common health concerns for lesbian and bisexual women include:

Heart disease. Heart disease is the #1 killer of all women. The more risk factors you have, the greater the chance that you will develop heart disease. There are some risk factors that you

cannot control, such as age, family health history, and race. But you can protect yourself from heart disease by not smoking, controlling your blood pressure and cholesterol, exercising, and eating well. These things also help prevent type 2 diabetes, a leading cause of heart disease.

Lesbians and bisexual women have a higher rate of obesity, smoking, and stress. All of these are risk factors for heart disease. As such, lesbians and bisexual women should talk with their doctors about how to prevent heart disease.

Cancer. The most common cancers for all women are breast, lung, colon, uterine, and ovarian. Several factors put lesbian and bisexual women at higher risk for developing some cancers. Remember:

- Lesbians are less likely than heterosexual women to have had a full-term pregnancy. Hormones released during pregnancy and breastfeeding are thought to protect women against breast, endometrial, and ovarian cancers.
- Lesbians and bisexual women are less likely to get routine screenings, such as a Pap test, which can prevent or detect cervical cancer. The viruses that cause most cervical cancer can be sexually transmitted between women. Bisexual women, who may be less likely than lesbians to have health insurance, are even more likely to skip these tests.
- Lesbians and bisexual women are less likely than other women to get routine mammograms and clinical breast exams. This may be due to lesbians' and bisexuals' lack of health insurance, fear of discrimination,



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or bad experiences with health care providers. Failure to get these tests lowers women's chances of catching cancer early enough for treatments to work.

- Lesbians are more likely to smoke than heterosexual women are, and bisexual women are the most likely to smoke. This increases the risk for lung cancer in all women who have sex with women.

Depression and anxiety. Many factors cause depression and anxiety among all women. However, lesbian and bisexual women report higher rates of depression and anxiety than other women do. Bisexual women are even more likely than lesbians to have had a mood or anxiety disorder. Depression and anxiety in lesbian and bisexual women may be due to:

- Social stigma
- Rejection by family members
- Abuse and violence
- Unfair treatment in the legal system
- Stress from hiding some or all parts of one's life
- Lack of health insurance

Lesbians and bisexuals often feel they have to hide their sexual orientation from family, friends, and employers. Bisexual women may feel even more alone because they don't feel included in either the heterosexual community or the gay and lesbian community. Lesbians and bisexuals can also be victims of hate crimes and violence. Discrimination against these groups does exist. Bias for any reason may lead to depression and anxiety.

Polycystic Ovary Syndrome

(PCOS). PCOS is the most common hormonal problem of the reproductive system in women of childbearing age. PCOS is a health problem that can affect a woman's:

- Menstrual cycle (monthly bleeding)
- Fertility (ability to get pregnant)
- Hormones
- Insulin production
- Heart
- Blood vessels
- Appearance

Five to 10 percent of women of childbearing age have PCOS. Lesbians may have a higher rate of PCOS than heterosexual women.

Q: What factors put lesbians' and bisexual women's health at risk?

A: There are a lot of things that can cause health problems for lesbians and bisexual women. Some of these may be outside of your control. Other things you can work to improve upon. These include:

Lack of fitness. Being obese and not exercising can raise your risk of heart disease, some cancers, and early death. Many studies show that lesbians and bisexual women have a higher body mass index (BMI) than other women. Studies suggest that lesbians may store more of their fat in the abdomen (stomach area). Belly fat increases the risk for heart disease and type 2 diabetes. Some studies also suggest that lesbians think less about weight issues than heterosexual women do.

