

WOMEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH WOMEN

Healthcare for women who have sex with women (WSW) should embrace general physical and mental health, and women's health issues as well as those specific to their sexuality.

At all times use open questions with all clients. Do not make assumptions about sexuality. Remember to ask about sex with male partners in the past or currently.

Offer a choice of staff - many prefer to be treated by women only.

WSW are welcome to attend all generic Sandyford services

Specialist sexual and reproductive health clinic

General internal referral to SRH complex service

Sexual Problems Clinic

Appointments via Sexual Problems Secretary on 0141 211 8608

Sexual Health Issues

Sexual Behaviour

Data from NATSAL-3 suggested that 11.5% of women aged 16-74 years have had a sexual experience or contact with another woman. Sexual behaviour needs to be asked about to assess STI risks.

Please remember that up to 82% of lesbian women have had past or present sexual activity with men, 5% in the past year and 26% report a history of pregnancy.

Investigations

There is the potential for woman-to-woman transmission of trichomoniasis, genital herpes, vulval and cervical HPV, hepatitis A, syphilis and HIV. Woman to woman transmission of chlamydia or gonorrhoea is less common and probably associated with shared toys. Bacterial vaginosis is the commonest sexually related condition in lesbian women and studies have reported a high incidence of BV in female partners of lesbians with BV. Any symptomatic partners should be encouraged to attend the pharmacy or GP for appropriate treatment.

When discussing sexual health screening, involve the woman in choosing the most appropriate investigations

Several studies report a high prevalence of HIV risk behaviour in lesbians who report sex with men. These include sex with bisexual men, injecting drug use and transactional sex. HIV testing should be offered.

Management

As per individual conditions.

Dental dams may reduce exchange of body fluids and are available in a variety of flavours, thickness and colours. Femidoms are available through the GG&C free condom scheme. Safe sex practices should be discussed in the context of the client's sexual history.

Sexual Wellbeing

LGBT Scotland has produced a document "*Good Sex Is... for women who have sex with women*", in collaboration with [Healthy Respect](#) (NHS Lothian) and [NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde](#). It has a focus on pleasure and consent throughout, reinforced with advice about safer sex practises and how to access relevant resources. The guide uses medically accurate information written in plain language to help young people make informed choices. <https://www.lgbtyouth.org.uk/media/1633/good-sex-is-women.pdf> (Accessed 13/08/2025)

Mental Health Issues

Studies reveal a high incidence of stress in WSW of all ages related to homophobia in their families, institutions and society, and financial insecurity.

Stonewall Scotland LGBT Report 2018

- Experience anxiety in last year; 72% bi women, 51% lesbians
- Deliberate self-harm; 29% bi women, 13% lesbians; compared to 0.4% of the general population
- Suicidal ideation; 48% bi women, 23% lesbians

Gender based violence

- Lesbian women are more likely to have experienced abuse over their lifetime compared with heterosexual women, including childhood and adult sexual assault.
- One in four lesbian and bisexual women have experienced domestic violence, the same as heterosexual women. In two thirds of cases the perpetrator was another woman.
- Physical violence between lesbian partners is closely associated with stress and substance abuse.
- Four in five have not reported incidents of domestic violence to the police and those that did, only half were happy with their response.
- Therefore routinely enquire about sexual violence and in event of disclosure important to safeguard and signpost to support.

Sexual problems

Where a sexual problem such a vaginismus, vulvodynia or low libido is identified, WSW can be referred by a healthcare professional or self-refer into sexual problems service.

Women's Health Issues

Cervical cytological screening is recommended for **all** women, whatever their sexual orientation.

Frequency of screening is from age 25 years every 5 years until 65 years (or older depending on any abnormal tests).

Cancer

WSW may be:

- more likely to develop breast cancer than heterosexual women
- More prone to ovarian and endometrial cancers which occur more frequently in nulliparity and those who have not used oral contraceptives.
- HPV infection can be transmitted from women to women, and CIN has been found in women who have never had sex with men.

Reproduction

Approximately 30% of lesbians have children: this may be through relationships with men or by assisted conception provided by a fertility service.

Referral can be made to the local Assisted Conception Unit. The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act (2008) states that a woman cannot be refused NHS fertility treatment on the grounds of sexual orientation.

Access criteria recommendations for infertility treatment for all couples is that eligible couples may be offered up to 2 cycles of IVF/ICSI where there is a reasonable expectation of a live birth.

Menopause / Ageing

Women who have had a natural or surgical menopause may experience physiological and psychological reactions including vaginal dryness, decreased pelvic floor resilience and poorer arousal. It is important to recognise the emotional impact of the menopause for all women.

41% of lesbians over the age of 50 live alone – this is significantly higher than in heterosexual women. They may be at increased risk of social isolation, particularly during illness or times of crisis.

Consider these factors and discuss appropriate support with women.

References

Health Needs Assessment of LGBT+ People in Scotland: Summary Infographic Report. NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, NHS Lothian & Public Health Scotland. June 13, 2022. [Infographic Summary]. Available at: https://www.lgbthealth.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Health-Needs-Assessment-of-LGBT-People-Scotland_Infographic-Summary-Final3-13-June-2022.pdf

Demographics

Macdowall W. Lifetime prevalence, associated factors, and circumstances of non-volitional sex in women and men in Britain: findings from the third National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal-3). Available from: DOI: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(13\)62300-4](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(13)62300-4) [accessed June 2023]

Lottmann, R., & King, A. (2020). Who can I turn to? Social networks and the housing, care and support preferences of older lesbian and gay people in the UK. *Sexualities*, 25(1-2), 9-24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460720944588>

STIs

Bailey JV. Sexual behaviour of lesbian and bisexual women. *Sex Transm Infect* 2003;79:147-50.

Fethers K, Marks C, Mindel A, Estcourt CS. Sexually transmitted infections and risk behaviours in women who have sex with women. *Sex Trans Infect* 2000;76(5) 345-9.

McNair R. Lesbian and bisexual women's sexual health. *Australian Family Physician*. 2009; 38(6):388-92.

Marrazzo JM, Koutsky LA, Stine KL, Kuypers JM et al. Genital human papillomavirus infection in women who have sex with women *Infect Dis* 1998;178:1604-9

Pregnancy

NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde. (n.d.). *Referral Acceptance Criteria*. In *Assisted Conception Service: Hospitals & Services A-Z*. NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde. Available at: [Referral Acceptance Criteria - NHSGGC](#) [Accessed 13/08/2025]

Stonewall. *IVF access in nations and regions*. Retrieved August 13, 2025, from Stonewall website: Stonewall Campaign — IVF for All: IVF access in nations and regions. Available at: [IVF access in nations and regions | Stonewall](#) [Accessed 13/08/2025]