



## Lesbian Health Looking After Your Cervix: HPV & Pap Smears

### Looking after your Cervix, HPV and having Pap Smears

Rates of cervical abnormalities for lesbians are similar to heterosexual women. However lesbians are less likely to have regular Pap smears than most women.

### Myths surrounding lesbians and Pap smears

In the past doctors have considered that:

- Lesbians did not need to have Pap smears (cervical screenings)
- Lesbians were not at risk of contracting the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV – genital warts)

### HPV is the most frequently acquired sexually transmitted infection (STI) in women, including lesbians.

Lesbians are at risk of contracting HPV

- HPV has been found in women who have never had sexual contact with men
- Lesbians, along with every other woman over 18, need to have a Pap smear every 2 years

### What is Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)?

There are over 100 types of HPV including some that affect the genitals.

- Genital HPV is similar to the virus that causes warts on other parts of the body

- 4 out of 5 people will have HPV at some stage in their lives
- Most people who have HPV don't realise unless they have an abnormal Pap smear result or if genital warts appear

### Transmission of HPV

- Genital HPV is spread through genital skin contact during sexual activity. It can spread through tiny breaks in the skin.
- Transmission can occur between female to female sexual partners

### Is there a cure or treatment for HPV?

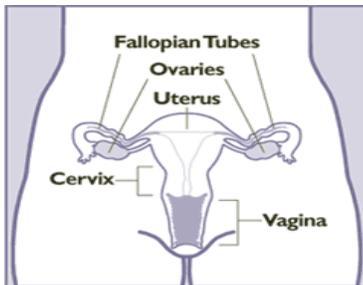
There is no cure or treatment for HPV, however, your immune system will clear it up in most cases. The effects of the virus such as any warts that appear or changes to the cells of the cervix can be treated.

### HPV is linked to Cervical Cancer

- A few types of HPV have been linked with causing abnormalities in the cervix, which can progress to cervical cancer
- When cervical cancer develops, HPV is found in almost all cases
- If the early changes of HPV are detected you may need regular check ups with your doctor. These changes can often clear up naturally in 8 to 14 months, if they do not your doctor may send you for a colposcopy to examine the changing cells in your cervix

### Why is the Cervix Important?

The cervix is the neck of the uterus (womb) and joins the top end of the vagina. The opening of the cervix allows menstrual blood to flow into the vagina and also dilates during child birth to let the fetus pass through.



The cervix is also known as a potential site for changes that can lead to cancer.

### What is Cervical Cancer?

Cervical cancer begins in the lining of the cervix. Cervical cancers do not form suddenly. Normal cervical cells gradually develop pre-cancerous changes that turn into cancer.

Only some women with pre-cancerous changes of the cervix will develop cancer. This process usually takes several years but sometimes can happen in less than a year.

- Common cervical cancer generally takes up to 10 years to develop

For most women, pre-cancerous cells will remain unchanged and go away without any treatment. But if these pre-cancers are treated, almost all cervical cancer can be prevented.

**Cervical cancer is one of the most preventable & curable forms of cancer. 90% of cases of common cervical cancer can be prevented if detected and treated early.**

### Who is at Risk of Cervix Cancer?

- All women who have ever had sex, with a man or a woman, are at risk of cervical cancer
- Cervical cancer can affect all age groups
- The risk increases with age, even after menopause

### Factors that increase the risk of cervical cancer

#### Age

- Around half of the new cases of cervical cancer each year are women over 50 years
- Women over 50 are less likely to have Pap smears than younger women
- More women over 50 die from cervical cancer due to late diagnosis which is more difficult to treat

#### Smoking

Women who smoke are up to 4 times at greater risk than non-smokers.

#### Sexual Activity

- Multiple Sexual Partners
- Being sexual activity at an early age (before 18 years)
- Sexually Transmitted Infections
- Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)

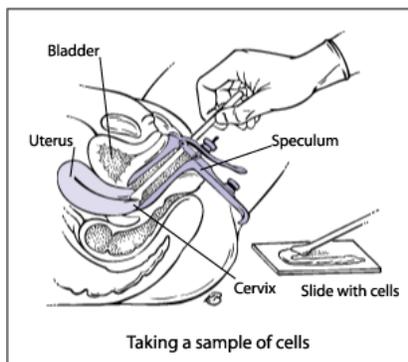
#### Not having regular Pap Smears

- The early stages of cervical cancer usually have no symptoms and can only be detected by a Pap smear
- Without Pap smears cervical cancer may be detected at later stages and will be more difficult to treat

### What is a Pap Smear?

A Pap smear is a screening test designed to detect early changes in the cells of the cervix:

- During a Pap smear an instrument known as a speculum is placed into the vagina to open it up. This enables the health practitioner to view the cervix
- This may be a little uncomfortable but it shouldn't last too long!!!
- The cervix is then cleaned by a cotton swab
- A spatula or soft brush is inserted to take a small sample of cells from the cervix
- The sample is then sent away for testing
- Pelvic examinations are often carried out at the same time as Pap smears



### How Often Should I have a Pap smear?

Every woman from the age of 18 or two years after her first sexual experience (whichever age is the earliest) should start to have a regular Pap smear every two years.

- If abnormalities are present in the Pap smear results you may be advised to have Pap smears more regularly

- If you are HIV positive it is recommended you have a Pap smear every six months
- If you experience abnormal vaginal bleeding or pain during sex it is recommended that you have a Pap smear

### Menopause, Hysterectomies and Pap smears

After menopause it is important to continue to have Pap smears every 2 years.

- If you have had a partial hysterectomy and your cervix was not removed you still need to have a Pap smear every 2 years
- If you had a total hysterectomy, your cervix and uterus were removed, you may still need to have a Pap smear - you should check with your health practitioner to be sure

### Being Comfortable when you are having a Pap Smear

It is important to find a health professional that will understand your needs.

Find a health practitioner that:

- You are comfortable with
- You can be open with regarding your sexuality and sexual history

This will help to ensure that you get the best health care possible.

### Golden Rule for women's health:

**Ask for a breast examination at the same time as having your regular Pap smear check up!**

### Finding the Right Health Practitioner For You!!!

- Try asking friends if they have or know of an understanding health practitioner they can recommend.
- Go to the QAHC Referral Directory [www.quac.org.au/referral](http://www.quac.org.au/referral) to find services with experience in working with LGBT clients
- Look in the LGBT press for advertisements for health services

### For more information

#### Family Planning QLD

(07) 3250 0240

Clinic locations throughout QLD go to:  
[www.fpq.com.au/locations.stm](http://www.fpq.com.au/locations.stm)

#### Women's Health Queensland Wide – Health Information Line

(07) 3839 9988

1800 017 676 (toll free outside Brisbane)  
[www.womhealth.org.au](http://www.womhealth.org.au)

#### Sexual Health Line - Queensland Health

(07) 3240 0240

[www.health.qld.gov.au/sexhealth/](http://www.health.qld.gov.au/sexhealth/)

#### Queensland Health Pap Smear Register

1800 777 790

#### Queensland Association for Healthy Communities

[www.qahc.org.au/lesbian](http://www.qahc.org.au/lesbian)

#### Gay and Lesbian Welfare Association

Counselling and referral, 7pm-10pm

**(07) 3017 1717**

1800 184 527 (toll free outside Brisbane)  
[www.glwa.org.au](http://www.glwa.org.au)

#### Open Doors Youth Support Service Inc

SEQ LGBT Young People & Families

(07) 3257 7660

[www.opendoors.net.au](http://www.opendoors.net.au)

### Sources

Australian Bureau of Statistics. 2005. *Cancer Trends*. [www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@nsf/PReviousproducts/1001.0Feature%20Article172005?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno+1301.0&issue=2005&num=&view=](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@nsf/PReviousproducts/1001.0Feature%20Article172005?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno+1301.0&issue=2005&num=&view=) (accessed October 7, 2006).

Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. 2006. *The Pap Smear*. [www.cervicalscreen.health.gov.au/internet/screening/publishing.nsf/Content/Papsmear](http://www.cervicalscreen.health.gov.au/internet/screening/publishing.nsf/Content/Papsmear) (accessed October 8, 2006).

Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. 2006. *HPV (human Papilloma virus)*. [www.cervicalscreen.health.gov.au/internet/screening/publishing.nsf/Content/hpv](http://www.cervicalscreen.health.gov.au/internet/screening/publishing.nsf/Content/hpv)

ACON - AIDS Council of New South Wales. 2006. *Opening the Window – A Guide to Lesbian Health*. [www.acon.org.au/community/index.cfm?doc\\_id=1332&cat\\_id=72](http://www.acon.org.au/community/index.cfm?doc_id=1332&cat_id=72) (accessed September 29, 2006).

Brown, A., J. Hassard, M. Fernback, E. Szabo, and M. Wakefield. 2003. Lesbians' experiences of cervical screening. *Health Promotion Journal of Australia*, 14 (2): 128-132. (accessed October 3, 2006, from Informat database).

Brown, R. 2000. *More than lip service: The report of the Lesbian Health Information Project*. [www.rwh.org.au/emplibrary/wellwomens/LHIP\\_FinalReport\\_Appendices.pdf](http://www.rwh.org.au/emplibrary/wellwomens/LHIP_FinalReport_Appendices.pdf) (accessed September 29, 2006).

McNair, R.P. 2003. Lesbian health inequalities: a cultural minority issue for health professionals. *eMJA* (12): 643-645. [www.mja.com.au/public/issues/178\\_12\\_160603/mcn10852\\_fm.html](http://www.mja.com.au/public/issues/178_12_160603/mcn10852_fm.html) (accessed September 24, 2006).

Morazzo, J.M. 2000. Genital Human Papillomavirus Infection in Women Who Have Sex with Women: A Concern for Patients and Providers. *AIDS PATIENT CARE and STDs*, 16 (8): 447-451 (accessed October 7, 2006, from EbscoHost: Medline database).

Queensland Government. 2006. *The Queensland Cervical Screening Program*. [www.health.qld.gov.au/brochure/cervical.asp](http://www.health.qld.gov.au/brochure/cervical.asp)

Womens Health Queensland Wide and Family Planning Queensland. 2004. *Sexual Health and Pap Smears*. [www.womhealth.org.au/factsheets/lesbians\\_sexualhealth\\_word.htm](http://www.womhealth.org.au/factsheets/lesbians_sexualhealth_word.htm) (assessed September 29, 2006)