

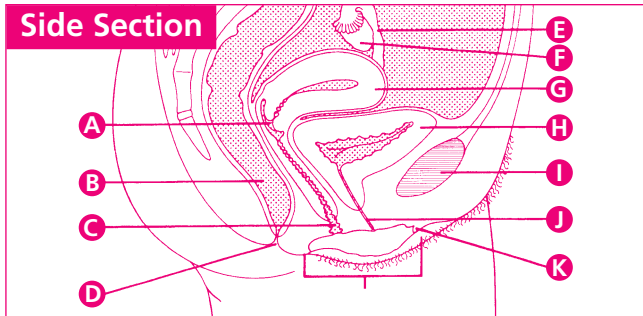


Sexual Health Information for Women Who Have Sex With Women

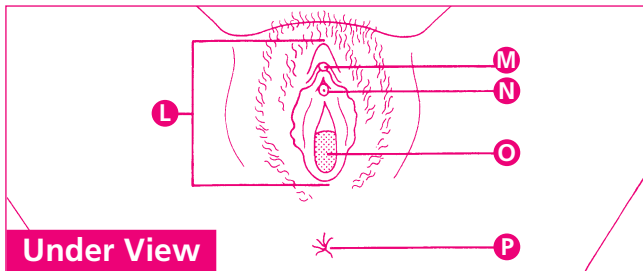


Female Genitals

Side Section



Under View



- | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------|
| A Cervix | I Pubic Bone |
| B Rectum | J Urethra |
| C Vagina | K Clitoris |
| D Anus | L Vulva |
| E Fallopian Tube | M Clitoris |
| F Ovary | N Urethra |
| G Womb | O Vagina |
| H Bladder | P Anus |

Anatomy

Description

Vulva	All of the outside genital area
Clitoris	Small sensitive budlike protrusion above urethra
Vagina	Passage to the womb
Cervix	Neck of womb
Urethra	Opening to the bladder
Anus	Opening to the back passage
Rectum	Lower part of the bowel
Fallopian Tubes	Tubes leading from the ovaries to the womb

Vaginal Health

The vagina is self-cleansing and therefore there is no need to wash inside it (douching).

Vaginal soreness and vulval irritation can be caused by over use of perfumed soaps, bubble baths, shower gels, etc.

After going to the toilet, always wipe from front to back (vagina to anus).

Vaginal Conditions

Bacterial Vaginosis (BV)

Bacterial Vaginosis occurs when there is a change in the vaginal acidity which encourages an overgrowth of mixed vaginal bacteria.

The cause of BV is usually unknown, but it may be triggered by the use of perfumed soaps/bubble bath and vaginal douching.

There is usually an increase in vaginal discharge, which is often described as 'milky', and some women may complain of a 'fishy' odour.

Some women may also have BV without symptoms. Symptomatic women may be treated with antibiotics. In pregnancy BV has been linked to premature labour and miscarriage.

It may be possible to transmit BV during sex between women (although at present the mechanisms of transmission are not really known) so it is suggested to avoid sharing sex toys unless using condoms (*see safer sex section*).

Thrush

Thrush is caused by an overgrowth of yeast called candida. Signs and symptoms may include vulval and vaginal itching, pain and soreness on penetration, redness of the vulva, burning when passing urine and a thick white discharge.

Trigger factors for thrush include wearing tight clothing, using perfumed soap/bubble bath, taking antibiotics and, sometimes, sex. It may be possible to transmit thrush during sex between women through touching and sharing sex toys.

Thrush can be treated with medicated cream, pessaries and tablets. These can be bought from a chemist, but if symptoms persist visit your doctor.

Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)

Genital Warts

Genital warts are fleshy growths found in the vulval and anal region. They may be itchy but are usually painless. They are caused by certain strains of Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), which are usually sexually acquired via skin contact, such as rubbing vulvas together (tribadism).

Women with genital warts do not need more regular smear tests than those without. There are a variety of treatment options including freezing and medicated cream.



Genital Herpes

Genital herpes is caused by a virus called Herpes Simplex Virus (HSV), which can spread if you have vaginal, anal and/or oral sex, or share sex toys.

HSV can also cause 'cold sores' on the mouth and nose. Symptoms include painful blisters and ulcers around the genital area.

Some women may acquire HSV infection but have no symptoms. After an episode of HSV, the virus becomes dormant but can recur in the future. Usually these recurrences are much milder than the first episode of HSV infection.

Anti-viral tablets can help the healing process and shorten the length of the episode.

Trichomonas Vaginalis (TV)

TV is a sexually transmitted infection, which can be passed between women during any sexual activity which involves the exchange of vaginal fluid.

Symptoms of TV include a frothy discharge, discomfort when passing urine, vulval soreness and sometimes an unpleasant vaginal odour. Women may also have TV infection without symptoms. TV is treated with antibiotics.

Chlamydia, Gonorrhoea and Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (PID)

Chlamydia and gonorrhoea are caused by bacteria which can infect the cervix, rectum, throat and urethra.

There may be a discharge but usually there are no symptoms. If left untreated these bacteria may lead to an infection in the fallopian tubes called Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (PID).

This may cause pain in the pelvic area especially during vaginal penetration and sometimes leads to fertility problems. If present these infections may be passed between women on shared sex toys, hands and by rubbing vulvas together (tribadism). Treatment is with antibiotics.

Syphilis

Syphilis is a bacterial infection causing a painless ulcer, usually found in the genital area.

This will disappear on its own and then some weeks to months later other symptoms may appear, such as a body rash and swollen glands.

These too will disappear leaving no symptoms, but the bacteria itself will stay present. If left untreated, syphilis can in later years cause serious nerve and body organ damage.

In its initial stages syphilis is very infectious and it can be passed on by close skin contact during sex. After the first two years or so it stops being infectious at all. Treatment is with antibiotic injections or tablets.

Hepatitis

Hepatitis is inflammation of the liver, which in some people may eventually lead to liver failure. It can be caused by viral infections, including Hepatitis A, B & C.

Hepatitis A

Hepatitis A can be transmitted through contaminated food and water supplies. It can also be transmitted through sex involving mouth to anus contact (rimming).

There are often no symptoms, and most people recover fully with no complications. Vaccination is available for people at high risk of infection.

Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B is predominantly a blood-borne virus, but it can be detected in other body fluids, such as saliva, semen and vaginal fluids and therefore can be sexually transmitted. The risk is higher if a partner is menstruating.

Transmission can also occur through sharing needles, cutting equipment and non-sterile tattooing equipment.

Most people notice no symptoms, although one sign of infection is jaundice. Vaccination is available for people at high risk of infection.

Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C is a blood-borne virus, which is mainly found in blood itself. Therefore, it is more prevalent in people who share needles and through exchange of blood products.

There is evidence that it can be sexually transmitted, although it is more common in people already infected with HIV.

HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus)

HIV is a virus that can be detected in body fluids, such as blood, semen and vaginal fluid.

It can enter the bloodstream through breaks in the skin and mucous membranes during sex.

It can also be transmitted through sharing needles, cutting equipment and non-sterile tattooing equipment.

Evidence to date suggests that sex between women is extremely low risk. There is currently no vaccination for HIV – however antiviral treatments are available if diagnosed with HIV.

AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome)

AIDS is the term for a collection of opportunistic infections, which may occur in some HIV-positive people. Early detection and treatment of HIV generally reduces the likelihood of developing AIDS.

Pubic Lice and Scabies

Both of these infections are caused by parasites. Pubic lice can be found in pubic hair and other body hair, including eyebrows and eyelashes.

They are spread by close physical contact and, rarely, through contact with infected bedding and towels.

Pubic lice cause itching and spots of blood may be noticed where there are bites on the skin.

Scabies affects the genitals, the lower abdomen, wrists and in between the fingers.

It is acquired through skin-to-skin contact with an infected person.

The main symptom of scabies is intense itching, which becomes worse at night in bed or after a hot shower or bath.

Treatment for both pubic lice and scabies is with a lotion that can be bought at a chemist.

Cystitis

Cystitis is usually caused by bacteria in the bladder. Symptoms include stinging when passing urine and needing to go frequently, and sometimes stomach pain.

Untreated it can lead to kidney infection and back pain. Drinking a lot of water (3-4 litres a day) can help flush the infection out.

Passing urine after sex may help to prevent cystitis. Treatments from the chemist may help with symptoms, but antibiotics may be needed to clear the infection completely.





Overall the risk of transmitting sexual infections between women is low. This risk depends on who you are having sex with and what you are doing with them.

Unprotected sex with men (vaginal, anal & oral) may increase your chance of acquiring an STI.

Infections could also be passed from one person to another on hands and sex toys when having sex with women or with men

Safer Sex Between Women

Safer sex between women is a personal choice. The following is recommended:

- If using sex toys use a new condom for each partner or between penetration of different orifices e.g. vaginal/anal. Alternatively sex toys can be washed with soap and water.
- Avoid oral sex if either of you have any cuts or sores in the mouth or on the lips.
- Be aware of the possibility of transmission of some infections via hands, fingers and mutual vulval rubbing and wash hands before and after sex.
- Wear latex gloves and use plenty of water-based lubricant for vaginal and anal fisting.

Safer sex with men

If having vaginal, anal or oral sex with a man use a condom. When used correctly condoms protect against pregnancy and STIs.

If you think you may have been at risk of an infection then have an STI screen.

If you think you may be at risk of unintended pregnancy, emergency hormonal contraception (effective up to 72 hours following unprotected intercourse) is available from pharmacies, your GP Practice, A and E departments, NHS Walk-in centres, community contraception clinic and some sexual health clinics.

Lubricants

Lubricant can make sex more comfortable and helps to avoid friction and breaks in the skin. Water-based lubricants are recommended for use with dildos, latex gloves and condoms as they do not damage rubber.

Cervical Smears

The NHS Cervical Screening Programme offers cervical smears to ALL women between the ages of 25-64 years.

This programme is co-ordinated by your General Practitioner (GP), so it is important to register with a local surgery.

Women who have sex with women (WSW) should have regular cervical smears including those who have never had sex with a man.

Smear tests generally need repeating every three to five years.

Breast Awareness

It is important to get to know what your own breasts look and feel like.

The best time to carry out self examination is immediately following your period.

Seek advice from your GP if you notice any obvious lumps, discharge from your nipples or discolouration.

Women over the age of fifty are invited for a mammogram screen (x-ray of the breasts) every three years as they are at increased risk of breast cancer.

Other Sexual Health Concerns

You can discuss these with a GP, Practice Nurse or at a community contraception clinic or sexual health clinic as they may be able to refer you to a specialist.

These concerns may be about skin conditions, sexual problems, issues of sexual abuse or assault and gynaecological and fertility issues.



Resource List

www.gingerbeer.co.uk

www.womenshealthlondon.org.uk

www.pinkparents.org.uk

Telephone helpline: 08701 273 274

www.stonewall.org.uk

Tel: 020 7593 1850

www.llgs.org.uk

London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard

Telephone helpline: 020 7837 7234

www.pacehealth.org.uk

London based counselling and advocacy service. Telephone: 020 7700 1323

www.broken-rainbow.org.uk

LGBT domestic violence support

Telephone helpline: 08452 60 44 60

www.aidsmap.com

www.avert.org

Focuses on young people

www.condomessentialwear.co.uk

Free and confidential telephone sexual health helpline: 0800 567 123

www.fpa.org.uk

Telephone helpline: 0845 310 1334

www.tht.org.uk

Terrence Higgins Trust information, support and advice on HIV and sexual health. Tel: THT Direct: 0845 1221 200

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Your local Sexual Health Clinic

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For more leaflets contact **The Sexual Health Information Line: 0800 567 123**

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